



MULBERRY RELOCATIONS

Guide to West Kent

Edition 1.0

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Life in West Kent

From small hamlets and villages, to bustling market towns, West Kent is not only a beautiful place to live, but benefits from its close proximity to London. Both Heathrow and Gatwick airport are within easy reach as is Paris and Brussels, thanks to the Eurostar.

While the advantages to commuters are obvious, there are many other attractive elements to the county. Despite its strong transport links, and relatively high population, much of Kent remains rural, with acres of protected countryside. Towards the east and south of the county, there are many miles of blue flag beaches and coastline, as well as unspoilt cliff tops and coves.

The growing popularity and recognised importance of environmental issues has helped boost the county's traditional food producers. Farmer's Markets and organic farm shops are a familiar sight within the towns and country lanes around West Kent and there are also plenty of 'veggie box' schemes, with farmers providing fresh, locally grown organic produce direct to your door.

Kent's heritage and natural resources are deeply etched into the landscape and architecture of the county. Kent is home to more stately homes, estates, castles and gardens than any other part of the UK. Kentish ragstone, a hard, blue-grey limestone traditionally quarried from the Maidstone area, has helped to build many of these county's fine houses as well as its cottages and dry stone walls. Kent's close proximity to London and the coastline has helped it maintain a leading role in English history throughout the years and it is this heritage that has helped shape many of the beautiful hamlets, villages and towns in the area.

Within the bustling towns of Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, West Malling and Maidstone, high street shops, traditional markets, cafes, restaurants and bars can be found, along with strong transport links to London. Nearby lies the Weald - an area of outstanding natural beauty in West Kent, with small villages pocketed among fields, woodland and country estates. Once stretching from the marshland towards the south of the county, down to Hampshire, today, the Weald of Kent is a highly sought after area for residents and visitors alike.



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Royal Tunbridge Wells

Royal Tunbridge Wells has enjoyed popularity as a Spa retreat over the last four centuries, attracting aristocrats from around the country to come and enjoy the fresh spring water running underneath this beautiful town. Thanks to their patronage, Tunbridge Wells is quite distinct from other Kentish towns. It's emergence as a key Spa destination took hold during the late 1600's. Strong Georgian architecture is evident throughout the town, including the popular Pantiles – an attractive street named after the roof tiles pitched on its pretty buildings, many of which contain a quirky mix of small, independent shops and boutiques.

The town has been officially 'royal' since 1909 when King Edward VII granted this title and has continued to retain a sense of elegance and sophistication. Commuters enjoy a mere 45 minute journey to the centre of London while the town's strong performing schools and colleges help to ensure that this remains a highly desirable place for families to live and work.

A few minutes drive away from Tunbridge Wells in any direction leads you directly into the heart of the countryside while a network of fast 'A' roads takes you to the nearby motorways.

Sevenoaks

Benefiting from a fast, regular train service and with the M25 just a few minutes drive away, Sevenoaks has all the advantages that strong transport links can provide, and yet continues to maintain a small but stylish market town feel.

At its centre lies a bustling high street with its strong mix of both large retailers and independent stores. Towards the end of the High Street is Sevenoaks School, one of the UK's leading independent schools and also one of the oldest, dating back to 1432. 24 years later, in 1456, Knole House was built. Set in beautiful grounds, the house is surrounded by a deer park, the last remaining medieval park of its kind and is open to the public throughout the year. Nearby you can find Vine Cricket Ground, where generations of locals have been enjoying a game or two since 1734.

With so much history, it is unsurprising that the homes and buildings in Sevenoaks are a stunning patchwork of Victorian, Georgian and Jacobean styles. A number of contemporary homes have also been sensitively built around the town, along with many conversions within older, period properties.

Several picturesque villages are nestled within Sevenoaks surrounding countryside, including Otford, Eynsford and Shoreham, which conveniently still have train services operating from small stations in all three villages. Each provides an hourly service to and from London.



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Tonbridge

While reservoirs, streams and rivers surround many of West Kent's towns, Tonbridge is one of two which benefit from having a river flowing through its centre. Today, the River Medway provides the opportunity to enjoy lazy summer days on boats and punts, but has driven much of the town's economy in previous centuries. It was once an important means of transportation for the county and many of the town's old wharfs and merchant buildings can be seen further up river, away from the main centre.

The river lies next to Tonbridge Castle which was originally built in the 11th Century and then fought over, seized, sacked and eventually saved several hundred years later by Henry VIII.

The high level of schooling is a hallmark of West Kent, and Tonbridge is no exception. Tonbridge School was founded in 1552 by Edward VI, with the intention of providing education to the sons of local landowners and aristocrats. Today, it continues to thrive as a leading private school, while grammar schools such as The Judd School and Tonbridge Grammar deliver highly regarded state funded education.

From a transport perspective, Tonbridge is well served by two major 'A' roads: the A25 and the A21 which provide links to major motorways and routes to the coast and capital. Tonbridge train station is one of the busiest in the county, with over 3.5 million passengers travelling to and from Tonbridge each year.

Westerham

Six miles west of Sevenoaks is Westerham, a name which quite literally means 'West of the Village'. Smaller than its neighbour, Westerham is a pretty, unspoilt town towards the upper northwest edge of Kent.

Like Tonbridge, Westerham has an attractive river, the Darent, flowing through its centre. Houses vary in style from quaint weatherboard cottages, to solid Victorian mews. Two well loved historical houses are just a few minutes drive from the town. Chartwell, the home of Winston Churchill is nearby, and a statue of the famous prime minister sits pride of place in Westerham, on the green. Hever Castle, the childhood home of Anne Boleyn is also very close by.

The M25 is just a few minutes drive along the A25, which cuts through the heart of the town. Westerham train station was closed some years ago, so while this has helped preserve its charming, unspoilt appeal, it does mean that commuters must head towards Sevenoaks or the neighbouring county of Surrey to pick up a fast train to London.



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Its small shops, traditional pubs and several lovely restaurants have helped to keep a gentle hum to the town and ensured that Westerham remains a highly desirable place to live.

The Weald

It is impossible to describe the beauty of West Kent without mentioning the Weald. The Weald is the name given to a large expanse of land which encompasses a number of small villages and towns throughout West Kent right up to the borders of East Sussex.

When travelling around West Kent, it is easy to identify the Weald as the 'flat' part. If you head down from any one of the hills south of Maidstone or east of Royal Tunbridge Wells you will start to drive through and enjoy the farmland, meadows and fields of the Weald.

Similar to many other low lying areas, the Weald has particularly heavy soil, which over the years, has helped create the bricks and clay needed to build many of the houses and buildings in the area. Beautiful towns such as Cranbrook and Wadhurst are interspersed with small holdings, farms and villages. Traditional country pubs and farm shops seem to appear in the quietest of lanes while some of the county's award winning producers of meats and cheeses can also be found here.

While beer and ale are typically the drinks associated with Kent, thanks to its legacy of hop farming, it is as an emerging wine region that the county is becoming known for. Many small scale 'micro' wine producers operate across the region, and larger scale companies have started to buy up land with the hope of creating a new, sustainable industry for the county.

As such, the Weald is well established 'green belt' land. New housing developments are rare, but when created, are generally sensitive affairs, with a high level of craftsmanship underpinning every one. Living in the Weald is best described as a combination of opposites. Many villages benefit from a railway line. Broadband is common and unproblematic. Yet mains gas isn't necessarily a given. Neither is mains drainage. But for those living in the Weald, this is all part of the charm. And if country walks, stunning scenery, log fires and woodburning stoves are all part of your dream home, the Weald is certainly worth a visit.



What to do and where to go

West Kent is a richly diverse area, with vibrant towns, and small country villages. Each has its unique social scene built around its own community, environment and location. The details provided over the next few pages are by no means exhaustive, but simply provide a few of our highlights.

Museums, Stately Homes and Places of Interest

Breathtaking gardens at Sissinghurst, black swans and romantic 13th century ruins at Scotney or the magnificent maze at Hever; these are just three of the castles that preside over West Kent. The county is blessed with the largest number of castles and historical homes in the UK and so there is always somewhere to go and something to do during weekends and school holidays. Near to Sevenoaks is the beautiful Knole Park (turn to page four for more information) while further towards Westerham is Chartwell, once home to Winston Churchill. While the buildings, artefacts and grounds are reason enough to visit many of Kent's Stately homes, it is often the colourful characters that have lived in these stunning properties that help create a certain atmosphere and enjoyable day trip. Penshurst Place is one such house, having been a home to the same family for over 650 years. Just a 20 minute drive from Sevenoaks is Down House, home to Charles Darwin, one of the most famous and controversial scientists, whose work continues to generate debate to this day. Billed as 'the most Beautiful Castle in the World' Leeds Castle is just south of Maidstone, near to junction 8 of the M20. With its beautiful moat, close connections with Henry VIII and rambling grounds, it is easy to see why this remains a popular choice for visitors and musicians alike. Many concerts involving international artists such as Elton John are held in the grounds, while the annual outdoor 'Proms' event is great fun for family and friends.

The Museum of Kent Life, off junction 5 of the M20 provides a working example of life in Kent throughout the ages. Similar to many other attractions in the area, it also plays host to a number of annual events, including Bonfire Night celebrations, summer fairs and Christmas crafts.

Much of West Kent is designated as an Area of Outstanding Beauty and specific facilities have been created to enable people to enjoy the great outdoors. Bewl Water Outdoor Centre is one such example where a whole host of activities from cycling to rock climbing, sailing and canoeing are on offer at this beautiful reservoir. Bedgebury National Pinetum and Forest is another 'must', with cycle routes and meandering paths taking visitors through one of the world's finest collections of Conifer Trees. Picnics and playtime are a firm agenda item for any visit, as is 'Go Ape' the adventure playground which takes children and adults high up into the treetops.



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Eating Out

West Kent offers an eclectic dining experience to suit every occasion. All the major towns have a string of high street favourite eateries as well as takeaways and small independent restaurants. Thackeray's in Tunbridge Wells has a particularly good reputation for fine dining, as does it's sister restaurant, the Hengist, in Aylesford village, near Maidstone. Nearby is the Hotel Du Vin which also has a great reputation for both its food and stylish, boutique atmosphere.

Many of the older, country pubs in the area still operate traditional opening times, with food served typically from noon – 3pm and again from 6 until 9pm. A whole host of food and wines are on offer from traditional 'pub grub' to gastro pubs and speciality restaurants. The Plough at Ivy Hatch is a particularly popular haunt for foodies, with a wide selection of seafood and game on offer, often sourced from local suppliers. The wine list is extensive and again includes locally brewed ales and wines.

Most pubs and restaurants cater for children, but it is well worth checking before heading out for the day.

Theatres, cinemas and galleries

Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and Sevenoaks have a number of theatres and cinemas within the area. The Tunbridge Wells Forum is a popular music venue with a wide range of artists performing regularly.

The arts are a strong tradition with Kent. From traditional illustrators such as Graham Clarke to the acclaimed contemporary artist Tracey Emin, galleries, art groups and clubs are very much part of a way of life.

For more information, visit www.kentarts.co.uk

Sports and Recreational Activities

Living in this part of the world provides a wide range of sporting and leisure facilities. While the towns are each well stocked with sports centres, private member gyms and spas, it is the great outdoors that provides the very best amenities. There are a whole host of clubs, schools and centres in West Kent dedicated to horse riding, rowing, cycling, hockey, running, canoeing, cricket, football, rugby, sailing and much, much more.

If spectating is more your thing, further afield, the Kent County Cricket Ground can be found in Canterbury and plays host to the occasional international game.

To get started, visit www.kentsport.org or keep an eye out local newspapers and magazines in shops and pubs.



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Shopping

Farmers markets take place regularly in each one of the towns listed in this guide. Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks in particular have great shopping facilities, while Bluewater, one of the largest shopping complexes in Europe, is a retail mecca for the entire South East, and is well situated on the A2, close to the M25.

A number of small independent retailers have sprung up around the county, many of which benefit from being able to trade and market their services online as well as on the high streets of the county's small villages and towns.

In addition, a number of Kent specific 'lifestyle' magazines have begun to appear in the waiting rooms of train stations and surgeries around the county, providing the perfect shopping guide for newcomers and residents alike.



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Transport Links

Trains, boats and planes...getting in and around West Kent is extremely easy and the entire county is blessed with a strong transport infrastructure.

Three key motorways – the M2, M20 and M26 make travelling through Kent by car accessible. All three are in easy reach of West Kent, but do not cut through its major towns or small villages. In turn, they are supported by a number of 'A' roads and a labyrinth of quieter, country roads.

The rail network in Kent provides excellent train services through all major towns, to and from London and to the Coast. The Eurostar operates from both Ebbsfleet near Bluewater, and further towards the south of the county, in Ashford, ensuring that both Paris and Brussels are a day trip away.

Kent is also home to the major shipping route to and from Europe and passenger ferries from Dover and Folkestone provides a more sedate way to travel across to the continent.

A number of private airports surround West Kent, most notably at Biggin Hill and Headcorn, while further east, lies Rochester and Lydd. Gatwick is approximately half an hour by car from Sevenoaks and Heathrow Airport can be reached in around an hour.



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Useful Links

Kent County Council's website offers a comprehensive guide to Kent. Visit

www.kent.gov.uk

To visit many of the stately homes and castles in the area, visit

www.nationaltrust.org.uk or www.english-heritage.org.uk

Many of the villages and towns in the area have their own community websites.

Simply 'google' your location of choice for more!

The County's main newspaper groups are Courier Media and KM and can be found online at www.thisiskent.co.uk and www.kentonline.co.uk respectively. The county's free Sunday newspaper, Kent on Sunday, can be found at www.kentnews.co.uk.

For more information about the County's vibrant farmer's markets, visit

www.kentfarmersmarket.org.uk, meanwhile Produced in Kent,

www.producedinkent.co.uk, provides the perfect lowdown for 'foodies' everywhere.

A directory of the County's state schools can be found on the education pages of the council's website www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-learning. For independent schools visit the Gabbitas Education website at www.gabbitas.co.uk.



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A Final Note about the West Kent Guide

Places change, buildings appear, roads improve and railway lines close down. Well, sometimes. But the point is this guide to West Kent has been put together by Mulberry Relocations Ltd. in good faith. We continually check and update the guides we create, both for West Kent and for London, so please do keep an eye on our website for new information.

Alternatively, for up to the minute advice on living in West Kent, please contact Mulberry Relocations.

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