

The town of  
Ludlow, and its  
Norman castle, lie  
to the south of the  
Shropshire Hills

# MIDDLE EARTH

Jenny Rowe enters the lost paradise of Tolkien's imagination on a visit to the  
Shropshire Hills, home of unspoilt landscapes and historic castles

The spiritual heart of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) has to be The Wrekin. It is the most famous Shropshire hill of them all, almost certainly the most walked, and credited as the inspiration behind JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth, or more specifically the Lonely Mountain – not least because *The Lord of the Rings* author wrote an entire essay about its “remarkable” history as a Celtic fortification, noting that he enjoyed “a most agreeable walk to the summit of the Wrekin, though the latter portion of it was a pretty stiff climb”. From here, breathless hikers can overlook 15 counties and The Wrekin remains an indomitable and easily identifiable figure on the horizon when travelling in the surrounding Shires. Located at the most north-easterly tip of the AONB, The Wrekin sets the tone for the rest of the landscape, which sprawls across around a quarter of the area of the county of Shropshire.

The AONB is a magnet for geologists, and the towns of Ludlow and Wenlock Edge have given their names to geological periods. There are more rocks of different ages in the Shropshire Hills than any area of similar size in the world and the world's oldest known complete fossil was also discovered at Caradoc, near Acton Scott.

As a result of this geodiversity, a number of unique landscapes rub shoulders here. The rocky peak of the Stiperstones, much of The Long Mynd plateau (reached on foot through the bucolic Carding Mill Valley), and the tips of the Clee Hills all provide awesome panoramic views. The low-lying areas were once dense woodland until large areas of trees were cleared in the early Middle Ages for grazing.



To this day much of the Shropshire Hills AONB is dependent on farming, such as the area around the town of Clun, home to the ruined Clun Castle and one of the most sparsely populated parts of England. This lack of people makes the nearby Rhos Fiddle Nature Reserve particularly special. Claiming to be “one of the quietest places in Shropshire” it is a large surviving fragment of ancient heathland floating in a swathe of vivid green agricultural heritage. The pools and surrounding wet heath make this a

good place for wading birds, particularly curlew and snipe. Dragonflies are plentiful too, including the black darter, Britain's smallest dragonfly. The nature reserve's tussock-covered terrain makes for tricky walking, but the flora and fauna may be appreciated from a nearby country lane. In late spring, look in the drier grassland for yellow mountain pansy, once a characteristic of many Shropshire's hilltops but sadly now scarce. During damper periods, multi-coloured sphagnum mosses and cotton

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grasses thrive. Further north in the shadow of the Stiperstones is The Bog Visitor Centre, a former school and one of the few remaining buildings of a lost mining village. Travelling further south leads to Bishop's Castle on the Welsh border. A castle was built here in 1100 by the Bishops of Hereford for defence against the Welsh. Little remains of it now, but the namesake town is an architectural treasure trove. The simple, Saxon grid of streets are lined with independent shops and The Three Tuns, a

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pub with Britain's oldest working brewery attached. The license was granted in 1642 by King Charles I to raise funds for his army. The House on Crutches Museum is another immaculate period piece in Bishop's Castle. The building dates back to Elizabethan times and inside you'll find a social history collection covering many aspects of community life. Just outside the town, meanwhile, sits Lower Brookshill, part of the National Garden Scheme. Visit on one of its open days to enjoy languorous

valley views, incorporating 10 acres of hillside greenery foaming with wildflowers, as well as a quaint cottage garden. If you're looking for a reason to visit the area, make a date for the Ludlow Food and Drink Festival (11-13 September 2020), which showcases small-scale, high-quality producers from Ludlow and the Welsh Marches. Indeed, if Tolkien was around to see it, he would surely approve of this more modern, but still magnanimous version of his beloved “Merry England”. ➤



# Five things to do in the Shropshire Hills

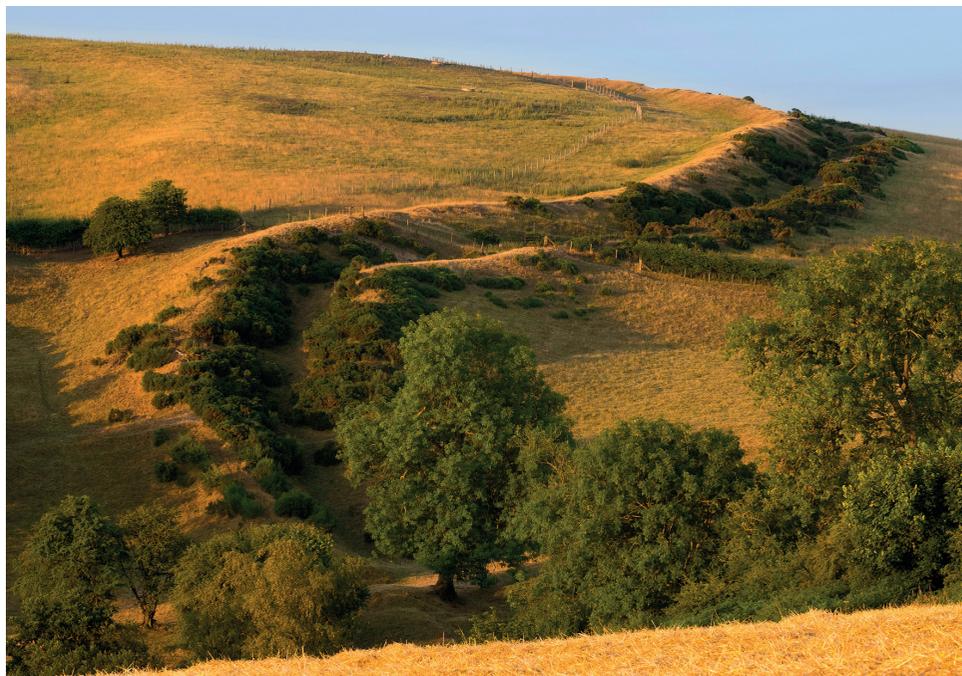
## 1. Offa's Dyke

You are clearly spoilt for choice when walking in the Shropshire Hills. The area also encompasses a section of Offa's Dyke, a 177-mile, 1,200-year-old earthwork boundary that weaves along the modern Anglo-Welsh border. The best way to experience the route is to start at Knighton, where there is a dedicated Offa's Dyke Association visitor centre that will set the scene before you head off into the hills.

Offa was King of Mercia from 757-796 AD and his kingdom grew so large that he was effectively an early King of England. It is not known why the Dyke was built, but it was likely intended as a boundary or defensive structure. What we do know for sure is that it offers spectacular viewpoints.

JOHN HAWWARD/SEBASTIAN WASEK/ALAMY

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[www.offasdyke.org.uk](http://www.offasdyke.org.uk)



## 2. Stokesay Castle

Untouched for 700 years, Stokesay Castle is one of the finest fortified manor houses in England and features in the 2007 blockbuster *Atonement*. Almost everything visible today was built in the 1280s and 1290s by Laurence of Ludlow, a local wool merchant. Laurence took advantage of an opportune moment in history; peace had only recently been established on the Welsh border following Edward I's conquest of Wales in 1284. But the late 13th century was nonetheless a period of increasing activity by bands of thieves. Stokesay struck a balance between the demands of security and its owner's wish to demonstrate his taste, wealth and importance. ➤

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[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)



### 3. Acton Scott

Conceived by Thomas Acton more than a generation ago to keep alive the 19th-century farming practices he grew up with, Acton Scott's Historic Working Farm is a window into an older world, when land was worked by horses and blacksmiths were regular visitors. As chickens cluck and ducks waddle at your feet, there are daily demonstrations of these period skills throughout the 1,500-acre estate.

During the English Civil War, it is believed that a skirmish took place at Acton Scott, and that Prince Rupert, the King's nephew, stayed at the grade II\*-listed Acton Hall. Elsewhere on the estate, there are four characterful holiday houses to rent and the restored 19th-century Old School is now a charming café.

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[www.actonscott.com](http://www.actonscott.com)

### 4. Ludlow

The historic town of Ludlow is a great base for exploring, with its 11th-century castle regally situated on a cliff above the River Teme. Close by is the Castle Lodge, which in Tudor times was the home of Elizabeth I's Master of Requests and is reputedly haunted by the spooky spirit of Catherine of Aragon. Another medieval must-see is St Laurence's Church, otherwise known as "the cathedral of the Marches", not least because its tower is 135 feet tall and commands brilliant views of the town and AONB, which unfolds on its doorstep. The heart of Henry VIII's older brother Arthur is buried beneath the chancel here; the rest of his body was interred at Worcester Cathedral.

Just around the corner on Bull Ring (a street that incidentally frames another enticing glimpse of the Shropshire Hills), you won't miss The Feathers Hotel and its famous grade I-listed timber façade, which was built in 1619. A recent £2 million makeover makes it Ludlow's most prestigious place to stay.

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[www.ludlow.org.uk](http://www.ludlow.org.uk); [www.feathersatludlow.co.uk](http://www.feathersatludlow.co.uk)



### 5. Mitchell's Fold

The focus of many local legends, Mitchell's Fold is a Bronze Age stone circle set in dramatic moorland on Stapeley Hill, the dolerite stone of which it is made from. While it once consisted of some 30 stones, just 15 still stand today – the tallest is thought to be one of a pair that would have formed a grand entrance.

Mitchell's Fold is just one of three stone circles in the area. Hoarstones stone circle is less than two miles north east of Mitchell's Fold, making it possible to walk between the two with views of the Stiperstones to the east and the Welsh hills to the west. Made up of 37 stones, this second site's name may be derived from its position at the junction of three parish boundaries – "Hoarstone" meaning "boundary stone". ■

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[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)