



DISCOVER SHROPSHIRE YE OLDE CHRISTMAS

With merry medieval villages, ancient landscapes, ruined castles and beguiling firesides, Shropshire in the festive season twinkles with tradition and traces of days of yore, says **Marie Kreft**

Photo: Steve Dorey
Hoar frost decorates the medieval market town of Ludlow in Shropshire, creating a stunning winter vista



Winter in the Shropshire Hills brings short days of mist-veiled sun and stargazers' long clear nights. Ash and alder, stripped of their finery, cast witchy silhouettes against the sky. The ground may be brittle with frost, or heaped in snow, or leaf-damped and earthy smelling. But one thing is as certain as the coming of solstice. It's the ease with which, in Shropshire's unblemished landscape, you can reach back and touch the past.

Pick a road, any country road, and you needn't journey far to find hamlets and villages that could be time-travellers from Victorian greetings cards. Woodsmoke curls from the chimneys of stone-built cottages, while leaded pub windows glow with firelight. Even place names evoke a cosier yesteryear: Cardington, Whittingslow, Hopesay.

Sometimes, when walking the moonscape plateau of the Long Mynd, or gazing out from the quartzite ridge of the Stiperstones into Wales, you sense the presence of something older – a world that predates Christmas and the pagan festivals that came before it.



TOP The village of Ironbridge, so named after its cast-iron bridge crossing the River Severn

ABOVE Enjoy carol singing at the Christmas Fayre in Much Wenlock

OPPOSITE, TOP Church Stretton sits beneath the striking moorland plateau of the Long Mynd

OPPOSITE, INSET St Laurence's Church in Church Stretton

Photos: Alamy

No wonder Shropshire is steeped in folklore.

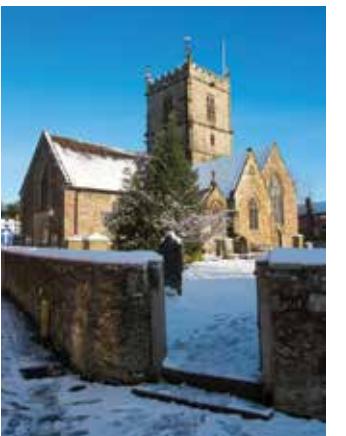
Since 1958, the Shropshire Hills region, extending from the Wrekin above Ironbridge Gorge to the Clun Forest, and from the Stiperstones to the Clee Hills, has been a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Tremendous efforts are made to understand and protect the AONB's fortuitous converging of geology, scenery, wildlife, cultural heritage and serenity.



Never is this serenity more palpable than in the twilight weeks of the year. While hedgehogs hibernate and warblers migrate, many of Shropshire's paid-for attractions undock their halls for the winter. Some of the best-attended Christmas events are in November – including Ludlow's Medieval Christmas Fayre (25-26 November this year). This spell of quietude is our cue to embrace the simple pleasures of the season.

Underneath this landlocked county lies a diversity of rock that over millions of years twisted and wrought its dramatic landscape, and now nurtures a richness of nature. It gives us infinite walking options. **Wenlock Edge**, a limestone escarpment running from near Ironbridge to Craven Arms, was formed in shallow tropical seas 400 million years ago and now harbours dense woodland that awaits your keen eyes and winter boots.

In sleepy **Much Wenlock**, where medieval, Georgian and Victorian buildings loll together companionably, you'll find specimens of Wenlock limestone. While brass bands and candlelit carols herald the annual Christmas Fayre (2 December), peer at Jubilee Fountain in the town square to



see evidence of tiny crystals, fossil corals and crinoids that existed long before we did.

RAMBLERS' REFUGE

An ideal walking base is **Church Stretton**, sheltered from the west by the Long Mynd and from the east by volcanic hills that include the Lawley and Caer Caradoc. When you're ready to wrap your frosty fingers around a mug of coffee, there are several welcoming cafés to try. I love the thrown-together elegance of **Berry's**.

Slip behind St Laurence's Church and up through Rectory Wood to reach the sweeping moorland of the **Long Mynd**, coffee-hued in winter with dead bracken. Look up for soaring buzzards in daytime hunting mode, or ravens eyeing carrion. Say hello to the wild ponies. If you venture into boggier parts and seek rabbit holes or overhung ledges, you may find golden-green mats of luminous moss, sometimes known as goblin gold.

In *A Night in the Snow* or *A Struggle for Life* (1865) the Reverend E Donald Carr recounts setting out on a Long Mynd crossing he had undertaken nearly 2,500 times before, getting lost in an unexpected blizzard

“WALKING LONG MYND’S MOONSCAPE, YOU SENSE AN OLDER WORLD”



and glissading down a ravine where he almost died. Following the blue waymarkers should keep you on track, taking you via **Pole Bank** – the Long Mynd's highest point – and down into Carding Mill Valley where the National Trust's **Chalet Pavilion** offers food, warmth and a secondhand bookshop.

RUGGED HILLS

North of Ironbridge Gorge, rising from a plain, is **The Wrekin**, 407m high and formed more than 600 million years ago from volcanic rock. The hill can appear crouching or mountainous depending on where you're standing, but its dominant presence on mid Shropshire's landscape means many Salopians consider it the embodiment of home. There's even a local toast: "To friends all around the Wrekin." Families often make the steepish ascent through bare oak woods to its hillfort top on Boxing Day or New Year's Day; perhaps the journey is as spiritual as it is about atoning for mince pies.

Limestone, volcanic, sandstone – and now quartzite. To walk the six-mile **Stiperstones** on a sunny day is invigorating, but when a chill wind passes or low-hanging cloud



TOP Wild ponies graze the Long Mynd in the snow-covered Shropshire Hills **ABOVE** A fieldfare feeds on guelder rose berries **OPPOSITE TOP** Walking the Stiperstones in winter offers atmospheric and beautiful views

Photos: Alamy, RSPB Images, Geograph/Alan Murray-Rust

blights your light, a mood of foreboding can overcome even the most sanguine walker. The ridge is entrenched in folklore – of apocalyptic ravens, of Wild Edric and his fairy bride. Its brooding atmosphere inspired DH Lawrence and Mary Webb. One tor is nicknamed the **Devil's Chair**.

But even in deepest December, the bleakness is tempered by the ever-changing dances of nature. Look for winter visitors such as fieldfares and redwings feasting on the haws and holly berries that thrive in acidic soil. "I once saw a red grouse against pure white snow," county ecologist Dan Wrench tells me. "That was pretty special." Dan says you can find mistletoe on the Stiperstones. And if you start your journey by the Bog Visitor Centre (closed in winter), you may see cushiony clumps of reindeer moss. This bushy lichen is appreciated by model railway enthusiasts who use it, spray-painted, to depict miniature greenery.

To tackle the Stiperstones on a day laden with cheer, try Boxing Day, when hundreds of revellers meet at the **Stiperstones Inn** to register for an Ilam 'Dawdle or Dash' to the Devil's Chair and back. Santa suits are



Holly day
On Christmas Eve, find out about the mysterious 400-year-old holly trees on *Living World*.

4

optional, free sandwiches and soup are served in the pub afterwards, and all money raised is donated to a local hospice.

OLDE WAYS

We have our traditions and ways, and so did our ancestors. Criss-crossing the geological and ecological layers of the Shropshire Hills are human imprints: Bronze and Iron Age hillforts, drovers' routes, mining scars. Some of the best-preserved sections of **Offa's Dyke** – an ancient linear earthwork at the boundary of Anglian Mercia and the Welsh kingdom of Powys – can be found in the Clun Valley.

And then we have manifold medieval strongholds and castle ruins whose walls carry stories of a turbulent past: Marcher lords and territorial disputes. Their presence reminds us of Shropshire's liminality at the borders of four English counties and two Welsh. **Clun Castle**'s ruins sit high on a natural spur, overlooking Clun Forest and into the Kerry Hills of Wales. **Bridgnorth Castle** was the victim of a botched explosion in the English Civil War and now its ruin slopes by 15 degrees – more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

DIVINE INSPIRATION

Three beautiful churches to visit

Parish Church of St Laurence
Topped with a 135-foot tower, Ludlow's awe-inspiring church is rich with treasures, including 28 intricately carved misericords. At 4pm on Christmas Eve, around 800 people will congregate for a Christingle service, partially held in candlelight.

St John the Baptist
Hope Bagot's predominantly Norman building is one of Shropshire's smallest

churches. Look for the 'holy well' and, fed by its waters, the drooping yew tree that's 1,600 plus years old. A carol service on Sunday 17 December (4pm) will be followed by mince pies in the adjacent village hall.

Holy Trinity Church
From its heavenly position overlooking Coalbrookdale, the 'Jewel of the Dale' (built by Abraham Darby IV) is holding a carol service on Sunday 17 December at 2.30pm.





HEART OF THE MARCHES

One of the most imposing castles would have been **Ludlow**, in turns a fortress, palace and the governing centre of Wales and border counties. Mary Tudor, a Queen of England in waiting, spent three winters here. The romantic ruins are subject to seasonal closures but, on 22 December, Carols in the Castle will take place by candlelight in the roofless medieval chapel. On 16 December at 7pm, the Ludlow Choral Society will sing carols from around the world in St Laurence's Church, the 'Cathedral of the Marches'.

Ludlow is a fruitful town for Christmas shopping. Alongside almost daily markets you'll find many independent stores: look for the **Bindery Shop** on Bull Ring, selling hand-printed letterpress cards, wrapping paper, and hand-bound diaries. When thirst calls, try the **Church Inn** for regional ales, or the **Ludlow Brewing Co**'s tap house in a converted railway shed near the station.

OF CASTLES AND CAROLS

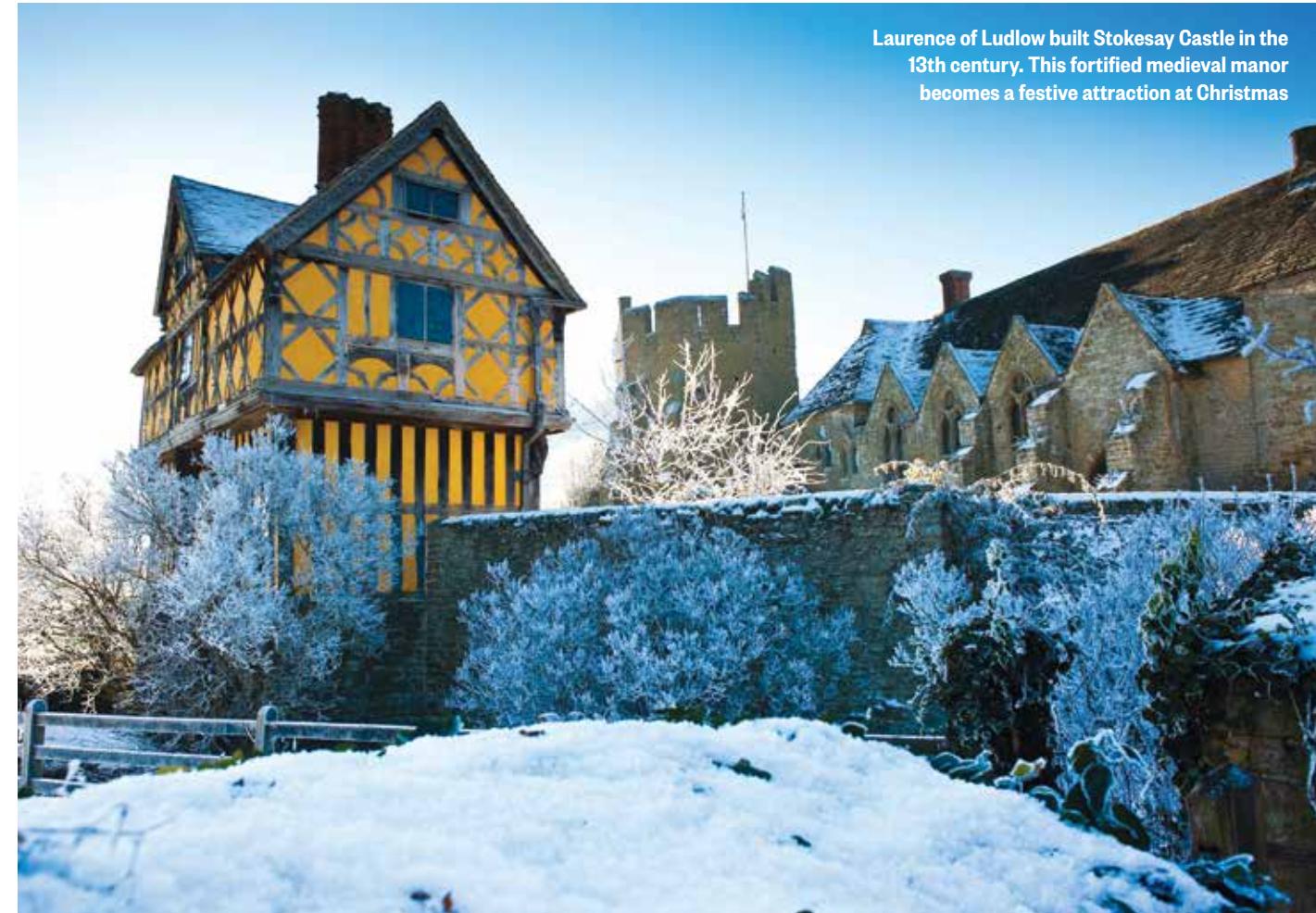
Seven miles away, cradled by wooded slopes in the River Onny valley, is **Stokesay Castle** – a fortified medieval manor house with a



TOP Ludlow castle in winter frost
ABOVE The Bindery Shop in Ludlow sells traditional hand-printed cards and hand-bound books
RIGHT The Three Tuns in the market town of Bishops Castle is England's oldest working brewery

striking 17th-century half-timbered gatehouse. From 6-8pm on 9 December, the cruck-ceilinged Great Hall will be transformed from ghostly to toasty for Christmas carolling, followed by a Shropshire mummers' play. Book early.

While the name **Bishop's Castle** conjures images of the marcher lords who governed the area in Norman times, the town's castle today is little more than a mound and the



Laurence of Ludlow built Stokesay Castle in the 13th century. This fortified medieval manor becomes a festive attraction at Christmas

sorry remains of a wall. Nevertheless, it is a fun place to visit, with its arty vibe and two breweries, including England's oldest working one. **The Three Tuns** was granted its licence by King Charles I in 1642.

At 11am on Boxing Day, crowds will gather outside the **Castle Hotel** to wave off the local hunt. If that's not your thing, take to the courtyard of the Three Tuns Inn where, from midday, morris dancers from the Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhoden's Tuppenny Dish will bring jingle bells to the proceedings.

Amid all the festivities, I think about the phrase 'as old as the hills'. We use it in jest or exaggeration but, in the depths of a Shropshire winter, it's heartening to think of the hills in their glorious steadfastness. The millions of seasons they have seen and have yet to see – including the snowdrops and promise of this coming spring. Have a happy, timeless Christmas. 



Marie Kreft is an award-winning writer and author of *Slow Travel: Shropshire* for Bradt Travel Guides. She lives with her husband and two small sons in Birmingham.



“SHROPSHIRE MORRIS DANCERS BRING JINGLE BELLS TO THE THREE TUNS”

CHRISTMAS LARDER

Food suppliers for your festive feast

Ludlow Food Centre Many delights are prepared at this Bromyard site by cheesemakers, bakers, butchers and chefs: watch them working in glass-fronted kitchens. ludlowfoodcentre.co.uk

Swifts Bakery A fifth-generation family business in Ludlow. swifts-bakery.co.uk

The Mousetrap Cheese Shop As specialist as its name suggests. mousetrapcheese.co.uk

Apley Farm Shop My children adore this shop near Bridgnorth, which is sometimes a stop for handmade sausage rolls, and sometimes a whole day out. apleyfarmshop.co.uk

Kerry Vale Vineyard To add award-winning English wine to your Christmas feast, visit this vineyard in Pentreheyling, open until 18 December. kerryvalevineyard.co.uk



NOW GO THERE

Where to walk, feast and make merry in Shropshire's hills and villages at Christmas, by **Marie Kreft**

CHRISTMAS FESTIVALS



1 Ludlow and Bridgnorth

On Tinsel Tuesdays in December, Ludlow's Castle Square lights up with a Christmas gift market, school choir carols and music from Merrie Noyse. For late shoppers, there's a Christmas Eve market, too. Bridgnorth is hosting a Christmas street market on Sunday 3 December.



2 Blists Hill Victorian Town

Blists Hill is an open-air 'living museum', with shops, cottages and role-playing volunteers showing the joys and realities of life in a Victorian town. Christmas festivities include tots' trails, 1800s-style entertainment and Father Christmas's grotto. Warm up with traditional fish and chips or ale in the New Inn.



3 Tenbury Mistletoe Festival

In early December, Tenbury Wells in northwest Worcestershire, separated from Shropshire by the River Teme, hosts the Tenbury Mistletoe Festival (2 December). Previous festivals have featured locally grown mistletoe, the crowning of a Mistletoe Queen, and a kiss-a-thon world record attempt.



TRAIN JOURNEY



5 Severn Valley Railway

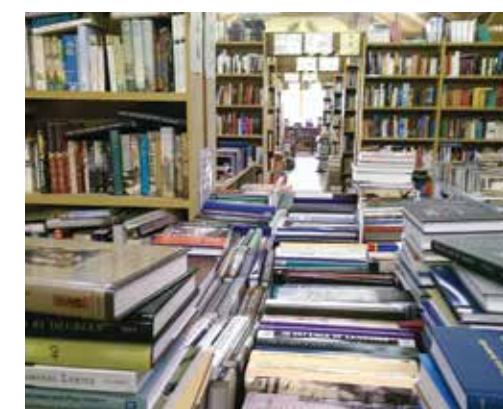
Slam-door carriages and wheezing whistles evoke a romantic age of travel as the region's most popular heritage line rumbles for 16 miles through the rural Severn Valley from Bridgnorth to Kidderminster. Book ahead to climb aboard the Santa Steam Specials and Christmas Carol Trains in December. svr.co.uk

SNOWY DAY

4 Aardvark Books

Over the Herefordshire border in Brampton Bryan, a 19th-century barn holds this vast bookshop, warming café, and child-friendly 'Book Burrow'. Its Christmas Fair on Sunday 10 December promises antiques, crafts, music, mince pies, mulled wine and jollity.

aardvark-books.com



Photos: Alamy



CAFE

6 Green Café Ludlow

Modern, imaginative British food served in a delightful riverside location at Ludlow's Mill on the Green. This friendly, unfussy café has an impressive list of local suppliers and a well-deserved string of plaudits. You'll need to book ahead. thegreencafe.co.uk

PUB

7 Green Dragon

Little Stretton
In a pretty black-and-white village two miles south of Church Stretton (look for an unusual thatched church), the Green Dragon offers scrumptious Sunday lunches, locally sourced meat and beers, and cider microbrewery. greendragonlittlestretton.co.uk



STAY

8 Hopton House

Hopton Heath
Within walking distance of Hopton Castle's atmospheric ruins, this dreamily comfortable B&B has super king-size beds, double-ended baths, and luxurious linen. Wake up to local bacon and sausages, and eggs from the resident hens. shropshirebreakfast.co.uk

9 Crown Country Inn

Munslow
Inglenook fireplaces, flagstone floors and timber beams make this former hundred house an ideal hideaway. Enjoy an excellent dinner in the two AA-rosette Corvedale Restaurant before retiring to your room in a converted Georgian stable block. crowncountryinn.co.uk

10 Wilderhope Manor

Longville in the Dale
Major Smallman was a Royalist who rode his horse over the precipice of Wenlock Edge to avoid capture by Roundheads. His gabled grey house is owned by the YHA, offering budget comfort in an inspiring wooded setting. yha.org.uk/hostel/wilderhope-manor



LOCAL DELICACY

No-one's sure how fidget pie got its name. Possibly it's because the ingredients (which include gammon, onion, potato, apple and cider) shuffle around in their pastry case when baked. It's delicious served cold with pickles at picnics, but in winter enjoy it hot with vegetables, accompanied by cloudy cider.

3 GREAT WALKS



11 Bury Ditches

from Clunton
Among the country's best-preserved hillforts, Bury Ditches dates from about 500BC. One of two clearly waymarked trails is Druid's Walk, just under two miles long with a short, steep ascent to the hillfort. Your reward: magnificent open views to pinewoods, mysterious in mist.



12 Iron Trail

from Ironbridge
The 3.5-mile circular Iron Trail starts on the world-famous iron bridge, winding up through the 'Sabbath Walks' to take in wintry views of the gorge from the Rotunda on Lincoln Hill. Collect a leaflet from the Museum of the Gorge, or the dispenser in Station Road Car Park.



13 Brown Clee Hill

from Ditton Priors
From Ditton Priors you can take a six-mile circular route that incorporates the twin summits of Brown Clee, Shropshire's highest hill. For a map and detailed instructions, search for 'Ditton Priors Walk 3' at shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk