

Beverley - steeped in history and one of the best places to live in the North

John Betjeman helped raise Beverley's profile with his assessment that it is "one of the most beautiful towns in England, a town to be walking in and not driving lorries through".

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Beverley is famed for its Minster, dedicated to St John and St Martin; founded around 700 AD. (JPIMedia).

But don't just take his word for it. In a recent poll, the town was found riding high in a list of "Best places to live in Northern England". Point proven, and the 19,000 who live and work here no doubt agree. It has a good selection of independent shops, decent rail links, a regular and much-loved market and if you enjoy food, early music, kites, literature,

chamber music, racing and puppetry – then there's a festival for you.

What is now the county town of the East Riding started life back around 700 AD, when it was founded by the man who became St John of Beverley. He had been Bishop of York and put down roots in a place that was then known as Inderawuda. It finally became Beverley after being Bevreli and Beverlac. And, many centuries later, a shipload of residents went over to the Americas and founded Beverly, in Massachusetts, and later, Beverly Hills in California.

The links are there, but if the well-heeled residents of the West Coast state ever delve into their past history, they might breathe a sigh of relief that the home to the great movie stars isn't known as Inderawuda Hills. It doesn't have quite the same sort of ring to it, does it?

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Beverley is now the county town of East Riding and regarded as one of the best places to live in the North. (JPIMedia).

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The reason why Beverley Minster has the best set of 10 ringing bells in Yorkshire, if not the country, is largely down to one man. He was a

redoubtable Victorian called Canon Henry Edward Nolloth, who was a man of independent means – he even said, when he was appointed to be Anglican vicar, that he wouldn't take a wage. He was there for 41 years and during that time he made major improvements to the bells (there were only eight when he arrived in 1880) and the Minster and its surroundings.

When you visit today, you'll notice that there are now over 100 statues placed in the niches on the exterior fabric, which he had carved locally, and put in place. The first one was Queen Victoria, for her Diamond Jubilee, in 1897. He also put in 15 new stained glass windows.

Since John Tenniel is said to have got his inspiration for the illustrations of the White Rabbit in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland from a carving in St Mary's Church, just up the road, some have wondered if he also drew a little on Canon Nolloth and how he looked for his take on the depiction of the Mad Hatter. There is a resemblance, but sadly Tenniel visited the town years before Nolloth arrived.



Historic Ladygate in the town. (JPIMedia).

St Mary's itself is one of the ecclesiastical gems of Yorkshire and inside there are dozens of unique historical features.

Nolloth was a benefactor to the town and endowed scholarships, and many public amenities. There was no problem that he couldn't solve – when he was told that those 10 bells wouldn't be able to be rung because there wouldn't be enough space for them to swing, he had another, higher, level constructed for them.

Today, his memory lives on through the beautiful chiming of the bells.

There have been bells at the Minster since pre-Norman times, varying in numbers and size. The prayer bell was cast in 1366, in a pit constructed adjacent to the Minster, and is still in the church today – it was rung when King Henry V visited Beverley after his victory over the French at the

Battle of Agincourt.



Beverley Races in May 1959. (YPN).

All the bells have names, and they include St Hilda, King Athelstan and St Winwald. The biggest, Great John, weighs seven tonnes, and strikes each hour, every day.

“There is history on every corner of the town,” says singer and social historian Vivien Ellis, who is preparing a new production about the locals remembered in pamphlets and ballads.

“You stumble on so many little details, some sad, some very funny. I like the story of the street sweepers in the days when everything was dependent on the horses.

“The streets would get very mucky, and there was one notoriously narrow passage near the market, where the lads – for a fee, naturally – would

brush the manure out of the way of the long-skirted ladies when they wished to cross the cobbles. Enterprisingly, they would then brush it back again after she had disappeared around the corner. This was recycling at its most inventive."

There have been some remarkable women in Beverley, as well, many of them connected with beer. Brewing it and serving it was for many years just about the only occupation that a female was allowed to do.

"It was allied to domestic skills," says Vivien, "and they were called 'ale wives', so there are quite a few songs and ballads about them."

Elsie Marney is a great example. "She was a lass in Georgian times, and she was so popular that she not only got her own ballad she also had a horse named after her, which did rather well at Beverley races, it seems. There's another about The Maid of Beverley, which sounds rather pure, but is, in fact, rather bawdy."

Locals know all about the legend of Nellie's, the pub in Hengate. Its real name is The White Horse Inn and it first opened its doors sometime around 1666, which (in terms of age) puts it only second to The Sun (which dates from 1530), on Flemingate, in the shadow of The Minster.

Nellie was one of the daughters of a publican and she and her sisters ruled the place for many decades. Just one of the "house rules" was that women (despite their presence behind the bar) were not allowed in.

It is said Nellie didn't like "modern ways" – the pub is said to be the last in the UK lit exclusively by gas mantles – or foul language. When she died, the streets of Beverley were lined with locals paying their respects.

Nellie would certainly have known of the "formidable" local politician, Alderman Alice Holtby, whose daughter Winifred wrote the best-selling *South Riding*, which held up civic life to examination on its pages.

Baroness Shirley Williams was only five when Winifred died (aged 37), but still today remembers her "generous spirits, incandescent with the radiance of her concentrated life".

Beverley is a remarkable town. It is home to the biggest store of pantomime scenery and props in the world, it has one of the finest racecourses in the UK, and used to launch its ships into the river sideways. It also has the notorious Grovehill roundabout, which has the largest number of traffic lights anywhere in Europe (48 of them).

Among the notable figures born here, or who made it their home, are Lizzie Simmonds, the Olympic swimmer, Thomas Percy (who was part of the Gunpowder Plot), film director Ken Annakin and writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft.

And let's not forget Joan of Leeds, the infamous medieval "runaway nun". You might say that Beverley really is blessed.

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