



# Urban legends

**Andrew Ditton** enjoys a city escape by pitching on a pair of Club sites ideally located for London exploration



Ordnance Survey Landranger Maps 177, 187, 188

**L**ONDON'S VIBRANT culture and rich history need no introduction, and caravanners can discover everything that England's capital has to offer from the comfort of a pair of perfectly-positioned Club sites.

While many of us consider anything within the M25 to be 'London', the Club's 150-pitch Alderstead Heath site is about as far removed from 'urban' as you can possibly get – this beautifully-landscaped site is surrounded by scenic woodland and acres of farmland. Mature trees and shrubs create screened-off pitching areas to give the illusion that this could be a grand garden, while the new children's play area and an adventure playground combine to make this a great base for those with kids.

Before we move on, though, a warning. On your final approach to Alderstead Heath, via narrow, twisting country lanes, it is crucial to switch off your sat-nav and follow the directions in the *Directory*.

Walking is a major draw here – indeed, the site lies on the North Downs Way, and one of the most popular strolls is to nearby Happy Valley. As you meander through woodland, past fields of crops and hidden wildflower meadows, you'll need to remind yourself that this rural idyll is near one of Britain's busiest motorways. A book on walking in the area is on sale at the site office, but there are also plenty of free leaflets available for casual strollers.

If all that fresh air and exercise builds up an appetite, head for Merstham and

Fanny's Farm Shop, a Surrey institution. After taking refreshment in the cosy tearoom or garden, spend a while exploring the slightly eccentric premises (which is still not connected to mains electricity!) before making the obligatory purchase of Fanny's famous orange marmalade.

Other quintessentially English days out lie on Alderstead Heath's doorstep. National Trust members will, no doubt, make the most of their card as both Chartwell and Polesden Lacey are close, near Westerham and Dorking, respectively.

"A day away from Chartwell is a day wasted," said Sir Winston Churchill when talking about his wondrous home and garden. A tour of this grand, yet friendly house provides a fascinating insight into the

private life of one of the country's most respected public figures, while a stroll of the gardens and adjacent woodland will help work off the tasty tea and sandwiches taken in the restaurant.

Opulent and flamboyant, Polesden Lacey also enjoys a cheerful atmosphere, but in a delightfully over-the-top, high society kind of way. Millionaire hostess Mrs Greville, the estate's last private owner, enjoyed nothing more than lavishing decadent hospitality upon the royalty and gentry of her day. If costume dramas float your petticoat, Polesden Lacey is just the place to indulge in a little private fantasy.

Should your romantic daydreams be broken by cries of "Mum, dad, I'm bored now!" then worry not. Nearby you will find an entire world of adventures. Chessington World of Adventures to be precise. It's hard to know where to begin when exploring Chessington. Do you start with

the mind-boggling array of rides? Go and see the gorillas, tigers and meerkats (among others) at the zoo? Or marvel at the sharks and rays as they swim over the glass tunnel of the sea life centre? Top tip is to avail yourself of Alderstead Heath's Wi-Fi to book online in advance and save yourself 25% on entry to Chessington.

Getting into London from Alderstead Heath is straightforward. You'll need to drive or take a cab to Coulsdon South station, from where frequent trains speed you to London Bridge or Victoria within 20 minutes – alternatively, you can change at East Croydon for direct services to East London and the Olympic Zone.

Access into the city is a little more convenient from the Club's Crystal Palace site, although owners of older motorhomes are advised to visit [tfl.gov.uk/lezlondon](http://tfl.gov.uk/lezlondon) or call 0845 607009 to check whether their vehicle is permitted inside the

## MEMBERS' VIEWS

**Bill and Jackie Hawkes** (right), from Gloucestershire, were staying at Alderstead Heath with their friend Sue Purnell. "We've only been here a short while but are already very impressed with the walking on offer," Jackie said. "Sue and I are here to help marshal the Cycle Road Race Test Event for the Olympic Games, which passes nearby the site."



**Rod and Margaret Billington** (left) are regulars at Crystal Palace. An established painter, Rod's favourite haunt is the Dulwich Picture Gallery, not just for its collections but also the good restaurant. Margaret recommends seeking out the vibrant Brixton Market for its tropical foods and fresh fish.

**INFORMATION**

**SITE**

Full details can be found on p198 (Alderstead Heath) and p160 (Crystal Palace) of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2011/12*. To book, call 01342 327490 or see [caravanclub.co.uk/seachandbook](http://caravanclub.co.uk/seachandbook).

**TOURISM**

- **Visit Surrey** – call 01483 444333 or see [visitsurrey.com](http://visitsurrey.com)
- **Visit London** – call 08701 566366 or see [visitlondon.com](http://visitlondon.com)
- **Transport for London** – a superb one-stop resource for all your route planning needs in the capital. Why not hire a Boris Bike? See [journeyplanner.tfl.gov.uk](http://journeyplanner.tfl.gov.uk).

**CYCLING**

- **From Alderstead Heath:** The nearest National Cycle Network route to this site is number 21, Greenwich to Gatwick, part of the Downs and Weald Cycle Route.
- **From Crystal Palace:** The nearest National Cycle Network route to this site is number 21, The Waterlink Way that starts in New Beckenham. You can also cycle in nearby Crystal Palace Park. See [sustrans.org.uk](http://sustrans.org.uk) for more information on each route.

**ATTRACTIONS**

**From Alderstead Heath**

- **Walking the North Downs Way** – see [nationaltrail.co.uk/northdowns](http://nationaltrail.co.uk/northdowns)
- **Godstone Farm** – call 01883 742546 or see [godstonefarm.co.uk](http://godstonefarm.co.uk)
- **Fanny's Farm Shop**, Merstham (right) – call 01737 554444 or see [fannysfarmshop.co.uk](http://fannysfarmshop.co.uk)
- **Chartwell**, Westerham – Winston Churchill's home. Opening times vary. Call 01732 868381 or see [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)
- **Polesden Lacey**, Great Bookham – opening times vary. Call 01372 452048 or see [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk)
- **Chessington World of Adventures** (right) – open daily Mar-Oct, variable opening weekends and school holidays in the winter. Call 08716 634477 or see [chessington.com](http://chessington.com)
- **RHS Wisley** – open all year. Call 0845 260 9000 or see [rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisley](http://rhs.org.uk/gardens/wisley)



**From Crystal Palace**

- **Crystal Palace Museum** – call 020 8676 0700 or see [crystalpalacemuseum.org.uk](http://crystalpalacemuseum.org.uk)
- **Dinosaurs at Crystal Palace Park** (right) – download an audio trail at [audiotrails.co.uk/dinosaurs](http://audiotrails.co.uk/dinosaurs) to listen to as you seek out the dinosaurs
- **Dulwich Picture Gallery** – open daily except Mondays; free tours Saturdays and Sundays. Call 020 8693 5254 or see [dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk](http://dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk)
- **Brixton Market** – every day except Sunday. See [brixtonmarket.net](http://brixtonmarket.net)
- **Horniman Museum**, Forest Hill – call 020 8699 1872 or see [horniman.ac.uk](http://horniman.ac.uk)



Low Emissions Zone (restrictions tighten even further in 2012).

Another full-facility site, Crystal Palace offers 126 pitches in attractively-secluded terraces, over half of which are hardstanding. Booking here is highly recommended, especially in summer when the site is popular with overseas visitors.

You have many travel options into London from here. The most popular choice is to take the number 3 bus from just outside the site entrance, which travels via Brixton before heading to Trafalgar Square and Oxford Circus. Alternatively, a delightful 15-minute stroll through the adjoining Crystal Palace Park leads to the local railway station.

As tempting as it might be to shoot off into London and enjoy the riches on offer, it would be a travesty not to spend a day or two exploring the delights that surround the site itself. The history of the Crystal Palace is fascinating, and the heritage trail lies quite literally on the site's doorstep.

The 'Palace of the People', recycled from the original used in the Great Exhibition of 1851, was a stunning iron and glass creation used as a national centre for the 'enlightenment of the people'. In addition to the building, the surrounding park boasted one of modern man's first forays into paleontology.

Some 33 life-size prehistoric animals were recreated in the gardens (the country's first theme park?).

Sadly, the Palace was destroyed by fire in 1936, but the dinosaurs remain and provide a wonderful free attraction – the experience has been brought bang up-to-date with interactive guides that you can download directly to your mobile phone.

Ten minutes' walk from the site is 'The Triangle', a delightful corner of Upper Norwood offering a superb selection of shops and eateries. Whether your culinary needs are an honest lunch in the community café, a frilly afternoon tea in the cupcake bakery, real French pastries

Crystal Palace



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Designed by Joseph Paxton, the original 'Crystal Palace' building was 1,851ft long

for brunch or a genuine Italian meal for supper, you'll find it all here, along with essentials such as a supermarket and Post Office.

If you've brought your bikes, whizz the two miles down College Hill (you'll puff and pant your way back up later) and pay a visit to the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the first purpose-built art gallery in England. Alternatively, the number 3 bus drops you close by. This remarkable building, dating from 1811, houses an impressive collection of Old Masters' paintings from across Europe and features legendary artists such as Gainsborough and Rubens. An admission charge is payable, but time your visit to fall on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon and you can avail yourself of a free guided tour.

Another super little trip from the site is to hop on the 363 bus to Horniman Park and visit the free-to-enter Horniman Museum and Gardens. The museum offers eclectic collections, namely anthropology, natural history and musical instruments. A modest fee is required to see the recently-renovated aquarium, but it's money well spent. Discover what is lurking beneath the surface of the humble British pond in addition to far more colourful displays of coral and tropical fish.

Once you've finished exploring everything the area has to offer, you can then make a start on London.

Whatever your agenda, whatever the season, whatever your age, one thing is certain – you'll run out of energy before you run out of things to see and do. ■

Alderstead Heath

