

A weekend mini break exploring the  
beautiful Essex countryside

**Day 1** Bluebell the motorhome is parked up behind Brit Stop number 216- which is nestled in an absolutely gorgeous part of Essex's countryside. The sun is shining despite the forecast warning of rain all day (win!) and we are having a brilliant weekend, that has been a combination of a little work and some play!



*Brit Stop 216*

Yesterday, after a gig in Suffolk, we hit the

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Friday rush hour traffic (although in reality we had a great run) with the destination of Thaxted, a pretty town in Essex, that was on our map for three reasons: it was close to a gig we were doing the next day, it was listed in both our Brit Stop bible and our Europe Camper Stop book as there being a motorhome aire in the car park, and it was close to the Secret Nuclear Bunker at Kelvedon Hatch.



*Thaxted Motorhome Aire- the parish council welcome motorhomers to park for up to 48 hrs, free of charge*

We arrived at the carpark in Thaxted at around 18:30 and were instantly made to feel welcome as motorhomers in their vil-

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lage. If only all towns had this mentality, the amount of space allocated for motorhomes was minimal, however because of their welcoming attitude we relaxed and went for drinks and a meal in their pub.



*The Swan Hotel, Thaxted, where we enjoyed a lovely meal*

The town of Thaxted is just gorgeous: it has a picture perfect windmill, a good example of a traditional long house and Armshouses, an interesting Engine house that houses the village fire engine, a medieval Guildhall, the house where Gustav Holst lived, and numerous other medieval properties.



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*Thaxted Windmill*



*LongHouse and Armshouses*



*Engine House*



*Guildhall*



*Standing outside Holst's former house! Very  
exciting treat for us*

Next morning, we decided on another quick  
wander around the town of Thaxted, before a  
40 minute drive south towards Kelvedon  
Hatch- a small village which is home to a de-  
commissioned Secret Nuclear Bunker. The  
bunker has been on our list of places to visit

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for a while; it was only revealed in 1992, prior to that it was run by the government and would have been used to house up to 600 Government officials, including the Prime Minister in the event of a Nuclear War.

Visiting Kelveden Hatch was absolutely incredible – it was without a doubt one of the most interesting places I’ve ever visited. It stirred up a mixture of emotions from us both- fascination at how it was built, maintained, and how it would have been used to “run” the country in the aftermath of a nuclear blast; fear over the prospect of how it would have affected not only our country but the world, how close it came to happening, the impacts of it happening, the preparation that civilians needed to undertake in the

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event of an attack; the questioning of morals when we discovered that the survival guide written for civilians was giving false hope in order to maintain calm and order in the hours running up to an attack; and amazement at the engineering of this humongous underground city, that was built underneath what looked like from the outside, a normal farmhouse!



*the farmhouse which sits over and disguised the bunker below. scary!!*

What made the bunker even more interesting to visit, aside from its amazing history, was the way in which it was presented. All the equipment and materials displayed were as it was during the years it was in operation,

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meaning you really didn't need to use any imagination at all whilst waking around the dimly lit, long cold corridors. Unfortunately I didn't take any photos whilst inside due to the numerous signs informing visitors that to do so required a £5 permit, something which in hindsight I wished I'd done - I didn't because I was intending on getting a guide book or postcards at the end of the visit, but once we got to the end they didn't really capture the atmosphere. I know though, that our visit will remain in my memory for a very long time.

It was also incredibly good value for money- at just £7 per adult, this fee included a very comprehensive and engaging audio tour, and we both came away agreeing that we would

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have happily paid several more pounds each to visit.

Once we'd completed our humbling tour, and after a quick lunch in the car park, we made the journey north for 36 miles (though a tremendous rain storm!!) towards Castle Hedingham, another picture perfect village which is home to one of the finest kept Norman Keeps in Britain, and where we are intending to visit tomorrow. As luck would have it, as soon as we pulled up, the rain stopped and the sun returned, and so we celebrated with a cheeky beer in the amazingly characteristic saloon bar of Brit Stop 216 before a village wander past all the old pretty houses. This area rivals some of the pretty villages we are lucky to have in Norfolk and Suffolk, and we had no

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idea about how chocolate box pretty it was  
going to be here.



*having a beer at Brit Stop 216 and decided  
what to eat later!*

So tonight we are booked in for a meal at  
216, we have worked up an appetite that's  
for sure, and Keith's in his element as he had  
an interesting chat with the guy that brews  
the beer for the pub, two pints of which he  
enjoyed this afternoon! I've got my eye on  
the Turkish specials board!

## **Day 2**

After a delicious meal accompanied by sever-  
al pints (well, we were researching the gravi-  
ty fed ale!!) we enjoyed an early night and a

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lay in this morning, helped somewhat by the rain that was pouring when we awoke this morning! Last night our meal was delicious- I tried the Turkish special, Lamb and Aubergine casserole, and Keefy tried a home-made burger. Both were mouth wateringly good, and were enjoyed washing it all down with some of the local ale.



*enjoying our meal*



*the beer here is gravity fed*

Our intention today was to visit The Castle at Castle Hedingham and once the rain had stopped we made the short journey there.

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The Castle is said to be one of the best preserved Norman Keeps in Europe, and is set within several acres of enjoyable gardens and woodland. We enjoyed walking round the gardens and woodland walks first, tiring out Jazz so he could sleep in the van whilst we went for a look inside.

We were lucky to see some lovely displays of Rhodedendrons and bluebells.



*the gardens at Castle Hedingham*

The keep is astonishingly well preserved- the arches and a real treat to be able to not only

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enjoy from the outside but also have a look  
around the inside.



*never too old to dress up as a Knight, eh?!*



The arch in the banquet hall is said to be the  
largest Norman arch in the world that is fully  
survived, and is 28 feet wide!



We really enjoyed our visit here, and again,

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thought it was a bargain at only £7.50 each to enter. On our way to the castle we had passed a road sign saying that the local Water Mill was open today as part of a national Mills Open weekend. Since the weather seemed to be behaving we decided to head on over for a look round.

We had rather a narrow approach into the car park and negotiated several low flying branches but I think we survived with no damage! It was a lovely way to spend an hour or so, chatting with the volunteers who were very knowledgeable, and we even got to try some biscuits that had been made from flour that had been ground at that mill. They were delicious. I was allowed to turn the wheel to make the water wheel go round and we've

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got a video of this, so il try and figure out  
how to include it on here.



### *Alderford Watermill*

During our visit, we were recommended a short stroll that left Alderford Mill and walked down to another local mill, Halls Mill. It was not possible to visit inside as it was privately owned and had been turned into a very large house, but nevertheless, we really enjoyed the pretty circular walk, and the mill itself was gorgeous. I would love to live somewhere like that!

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### *Hull's Mill*

Both these mills were recorded in the doomsday book, giving an idea of how old they are and it was really enjoyable seeing them.

This marked the end of our visit to Essex, so we grabbed a quick cuppa for the road and headed home- but we had an amazing weekend and we both are quite smitten with this area, so I know that we will return soon!!!

Until next time!

Lx

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