

Dorset's Golden Town



Made famous by the advert for a well-known brand of bread, there's more to Shaftesbury than Gold Hill.

Gold Hill in Shaftesbury.
(©Caroline Mills)

Perched on a hill in the most northern reaches of Dorset, Shaftesbury is one of those quintessentially English towns – and one of the oldest and highest in England. The Saxon town, reputedly founded by King Alfred the Great, is brimming with character, be it from the plethora of independent shops and cafes along the High Street or from the impressive views over the Blackmore Vale gained from Park Walk (looking south) and Castle Hill (looking north). This is Thomas Hardy country – Shaftesbury is known as Shaston in his novels and Ox House in the town comes into Hardy's novel, *Jude the Obscure*.

But it's Gold Hill that tourists come from around the world to see. It's argued that this results from 'the Hovis advert', once voted as Britain's favourite advertisement of all time. There's no doubt the nostalgic film of a young boy pushing a bike up the steep, cobbled

incline helped to put Shaftesbury on the tourist trail (even if the Yorkshire accented voiceover added a little confusion to the town's location in the country). But the scenic combination of cobbles, mismatched cottages beneath thatched and tiled roofs, and outstanding views – with a golden tinge at sun down – needs no filmmaker's tint to add to Gold Hill's atmospheric wonder.

For a pretty stroll, take a wander along Park Walk to admire the Dorset views, head down to St James and make the return journey up Gold Hill. Your efforts can be amply rewarded with an afternoon cream tea in The Salt Cellar at the hilltop. Do make time, also, to visit the Gold Hill Museum at the top of the hill. Free to enter, the town museum is a little gem with plenty to discover about the town (did you know that Dorset is famous for the manufacture of buttons?) and surrounding area on a wet day.



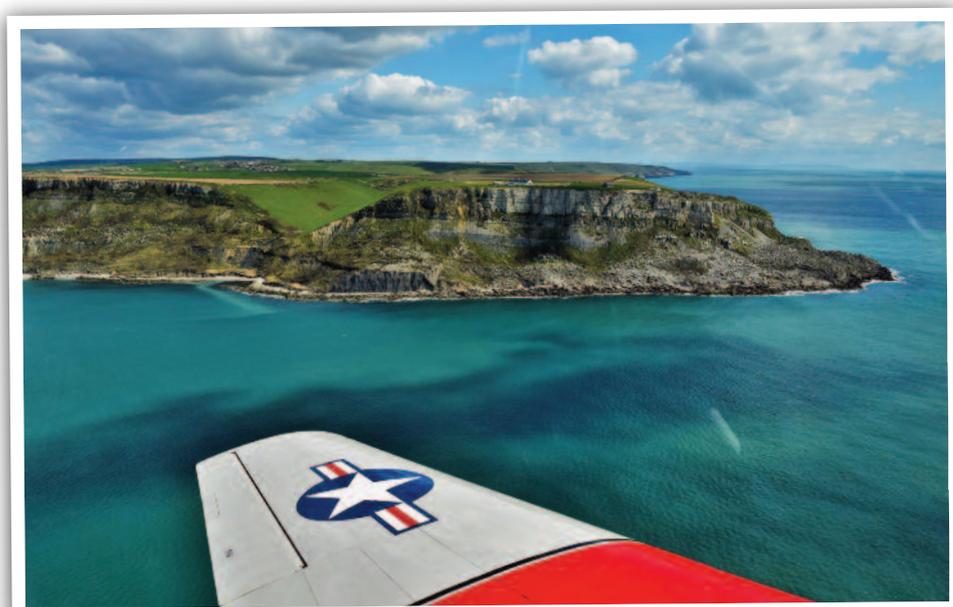
The world famous landscape gardens at Stourhead are a 15-minute drive from Shaftesbury.

Fontmell and Melbury Downs

With a landscape that has changed little since Thomas Hardy wrote his novels, the views from Fontmell and Melbury Downs are no less impressive than those seen from Shaftesbury. A walk and a picnic on these chalk downlands, which were bought by The National Trust in memory of Thomas Hardy to protect the landscape in which his novels are set, is exhilarating and refreshing. You're likely to see wild orchids and rare butterflies in spring and summer and it's also a great place to see glow worms at night. There's a small car park (accessible by motorhomes) at the top of Spread Eagle Hill from where a number of circular walks can be begin.

Compton Abbas Airfield

For those for whom a walk on the Downs is not high enough, a flight experience from Compton Abbas Airfield, four miles southeast of Shaftesbury, may satisfy your aerial ambitions. Select between a flight over the Dorset and Wiltshire countryside in a two-seater microlight, tea and cake for the family on the Isle of Wight travelling in a four-seater light aircraft or opt for a flight in one of the enthralling vintage aircraft such as the Harvard Warbird with its mesmeric, distinctive



Take a flight experience from the airfield at Compton Abbas.



Pretty houses along St James, one of the most attractive streets in Shaftesbury. (©Caroline Mills)



A Hardy landscape – views of the Dorset countryside seen from Park Walk in Shaftesbury. (©Caroline Mills)



The magnificent views of the Blackmore Vale seen from Fontmell Down. (©Caroline Mills)

sounding engine, or a wooden biplane. You can even have a go at wing-walking for the ultimate thrill-seeking adventure! Once you touch down – or even if you just want to rest your feet after a walk on Fontmell Down – visit the very popular restaurant for lunch or coffee and cake and more magnificent views of the Dorset countryside.

Stourhead

One of The National Trust's most iconic properties, the world famous landscape garden at Stourhead, just across the border in Wiltshire, provides a perfect day out from a base in Shaftesbury at any time of year. A frosty winter or crisp autumn day, in particular, make the setting all the more exquisite. But don't simply spend an hour or

two in the garden and head for home – there are 2,500 acres of parkland to explore with five way-marked walks accessible to visitors. Make time, too, for a visit to the Palladian villa. It's richly decorated on the main floor with paintings and Chippendale furniture but visit during the 'closed season' in the winter months and you can take a Behind Closed Doors tour of the remainder of the house to see the servants' quarters and attics. 🚗

➔ Discover More:

- www.shaftesburytourism.co.uk
- www.goldhillmuseum.org.uk
- www.shaftesburysnowdrops.org
- www.nationaltrust.org.uk/stourhead
- www.comptonabbasairfield.co.uk

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Shaftesbury's Town Hall in the High Street.



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➔ Fancy Visiting Right Now?:

Make the most of Britain's first Snowdrop Town

When Shaftesbury planted more than 60,000 snowdrops in 2011 to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, it became Britain's first 'snowdrop town'. Each year, the town plants more snowdrops and holds an annual Snowdrop Festival with activities, events and the opportunity to see the magnificent drifts of Shaftesbury snowdrops by taking three town walks. You can catch the remainder of the festival until 16th March 2018



If you visit Shaftesbury before mid-March, you can catch the tail end of the town's Snowdrop Festival.