



Extracts from *Make the Most of Your Time in Britain*

The book

Make the Most of Your Time in Britain describes the best of Britain, with 500 great things to do, see and experience.

The theme is that that many of the best travel adventures are right here on your doorstep, from Britain's unparalleled concentration of historic houses and gardens to the beauty and dramatic diversity of its landscapes – not to mention the colour, dynamism and downright eccentricity of its festivals and traditions.

Kinetic theatre in Glasgow

The slick façade of 103 Trongate, Glasgow's newest arts centre, conceals the home of one of the city's strangest and most compelling attractions: the Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre.

Visitors gather in a darkened gallery surrounded by the looming shapes of mechanical toys. In the hush and semi darkness, one of the figures begins to move: a sharp-eyed crow clanging a bell relentlessly. Hurdy gurdy music is the comic but dark-hued accompaniment, lights illuminate the structure and throw the sharp shadows of animated monkeys, rats and skeletons on to the walls, and the magical world of Sharmanka begins. Each piece has its allotted time, rising to a frenzy of whirling, clamorous activity until movement, music and lights subside, and the next toy entices visitors through the gallery.

Created in Leningrad in the shadow of harsh communist rule, the pieces are unmistakably political – their creator Eduard Bersudsky lived with the toys in his flat in the 70s and 80s, because their grotesque and allegorical qualities meant they could not be viewed publicly in the Soviet Union.

The Tower of Babel is tall and particularly intricate, its whirling, wheel-turning cast of donkeys, monkeys and historical figures including Stalin – brandishing an axe – engaged in a vain and doomed attempt to prove the supremacy of humankind. These are works of subversion, their comedy a fragile counter to a monolithic and oppressive state. And by necessity they were composed of junk: sewing machine parts, discarded motors, wire and pieces of old furniture.

But the effect of seeing the work is complex – they're satirical, but there's also something joyous in their inventiveness and in the simple pleasure of mechanical ingenuity. There's an echo of the communality that draws onlookers to gawp at mechanical clocks in city squares, and there's another thread of connectedness in that you are entering the fairytale world, with its shadows, its archetypes and its robust approach to sexuality: Nickodym is an unmistakably male figure, its erection rising and falling to hilarious effect as a little female bird sits atop his head and swings the bell attached to her beak.

Perestroika eventually enabled Bersudsky and his toys to leave the Soviet Union and move to Glasgow, free to create new pieces inspired by Scotland that are less overtly political. But, as the presence of organ grinder in his work suggests, humans are doomed to endless repetition. There is wisdom and warning in Sharmanka.



Rough Guide to Walks

I am the sole author of the Rough Guide to Walks in London & the Southeast, now in its third edition.

While working on the staff at Rough Guides, I originated a guidebook project that would take me, friends and readers to the downland, cliff paths and forest of the southeast of England, as well as to woods, waterways and parks in the capital.

The guide, now in a third improved and expanded edition, was described by Will Self as ‘pornography for the desk-bound.’

Reach for the skies at Jupiter Artland

Sitting in a tangle of busy roads in an unattractive semi-rural stretch west of Edinburgh, Jupiter Artland doesn’t appear to promise much. But its swirling metal gates are a portal to another world, one of parkland and woodland set around a 17th-century mansion, and a series of sight-specific artworks wonderfully woven into the natural environment.

Commissioned by the owners of the house, the works comprise a deeply personal collection, and one which is still evolving. The drive winds past monumental stones placed by Andy Goldsworthy in the branches of a dark patch of coppiced trees, and then opens out to Life Mounds, monumental stepped earthworks created by Charles Jencks to evoke and celebrate the cell. There’s a brief glimpse of the house before you reach converted stone outbuildings, patrolled by a peacock, where a shiny metal diner car dishes out gourmet sandwiches and coffees – a great fuelling stop for the longish woodland walk ahead.

The walk begins at Shane Waltener’s A World Wide Web, a scruffy shed in the trees with peepholes of varying heights which reveal a tangle of intricately constructed cobwebs. Beyond, Anish Kapoor’s Suck is a disconcerting rusty iron sinkhole in the earth; then a break in the trees reveals Anthony Gormley’s Firmament, a huge crouching figure composed of steel hexagons that frames the view of another iconic metal structure: the rust-red Forth Rail Bridge.

A more intimate work is Laura Ford’s Weeping Girls, six little downcast bronze figures scattered amongst the trees. Ian Hamilton Finlay’s trademark Classical surrealism is evident in the Xth Muse, a stately head of Sappho carved from Portland stone, while Andy Goldsworthy gives nature the upper hand in Stone House, a seemingly domestic space but with the dark interior dominated by uneven rough-cut stone.

There’s a lighter touch to Cornelia Parker’s Landscape with Gun and Tree, a gigantic shotgun leaning casually against a tree in an echo of Gainsborough’s Mr and Mrs Andrews. The path circles round to the drive back at Life Mounds, which beckon you to climb their terraces to survey the art-filled woodland you have just explored. In a final insouciant touch, Peter Liversidge’s fingerpost points skywards, indicating ‘Jupiter – 893 million to 964 million kilometres’.