

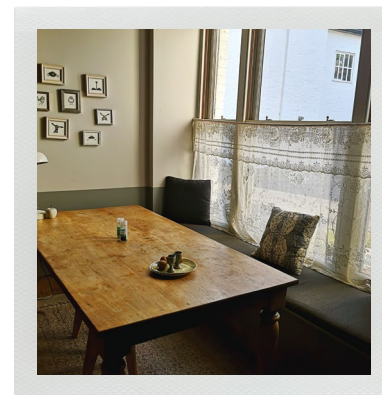


## Weekend away

AN AUTUMN STROLL IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF  
POET JOHN KEATS IS A GENTLE INTRODUCTION  
TO THE GRACIOUS CHARMS OF WINCHESTER

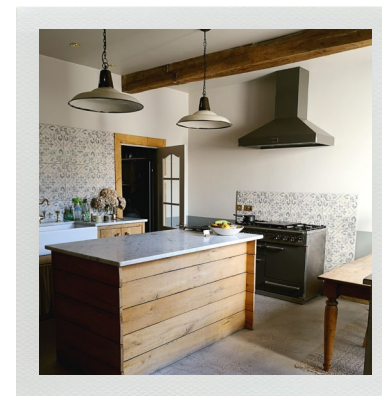
Words: **CLARE GOGERTY**

**T**he English Romantic poet John Keats stayed in Winchester during the late summer and early autumn of 1819. Every day he walked through the Cathedral Close and out along the River Itchen. It was on one of these walks that he was inspired to write *To Autumn*, one of the few poems that most of us recognise and can actually quote: 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun...' A couple of days in this gracious and prosperous town is enough to make anyone wax lyrical. It regularly tops those 'Best places to live in the UK' charts and you can see why: the homes are the stuff of property dreams, the cathedral is stupendous, and the town is wrapped in woodland and has a sparkling river running through its heart. In Winchester everything feels all right with the world.



### Where we stayed

A UK city break demands a central location. You want to ditch the car, pretend that this is your pied-à-terre, then walk out the door and straight into a bakery or café. Fortunately, our accommodation – 16a Parchment Street – was a hop away from the city centre which offers plenty of both. Described as 'luxury self catering', this former dance hall has three double bedrooms, plus a kitchen and living area which guests share. Capacious sofas, a DVD library, a well-equipped kitchen, wood-burner, a piano and even a pile of yoga mats meant that it was easy to extend the 'this is our other home' conceit even further. The opportunity to mingle with other guests however eluded us – we only glimpsed one couple fleetingly on the stairs as they dashed out for dinner.





## What we did

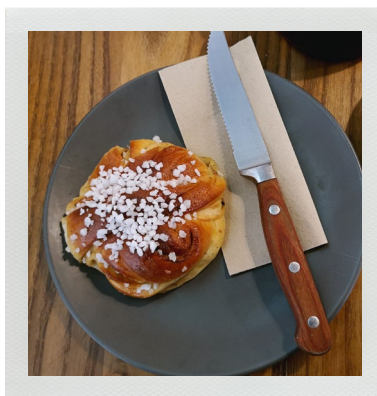
Following Keats' lead, we sauntered around the Cathedral Close, passing the Deanery and The Pilgrims' School before heading out to the water meadows. The tourist office issues a handy *Keats Walk* leaflet with a map, but it's hard to miss the River Itchen which rushes through the city and out into the country. A lovely amble through soft English countryside took us to the Hospital of St Cross, a medieval charitable institution that still functions as an almshouse. The walk back along the other side of the river through a nature reserve was about as Arcadian as you are likely to get on an English Sunday morning. Afterwards we ducked into the Winchester City Mill, a National Trust property that once harvested its energy to grind corn. It is still operational, although its function these days is mostly educational.



## What we ate

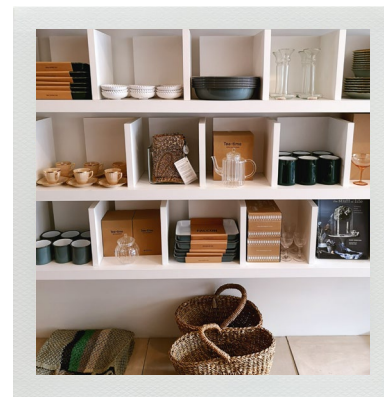
Winchester abounds with coffee- and cake-eating opportunities. We scoffed cardamom buns at Hoxton Bakehouse – a deliciously doughy breakfast option. The shop also sells its own sourdough and spelt loaves, among other glistening temptations, all banked up enticingly on wooden shelves. Supper options were plentiful, including the River Cottage Kitchen, the Michelin-

starred Black Rat and Piccaramba! – a winning combination of hearty pies and comic-book décor. We opted for a wood-fired pizza at Three Joes, liking the look (and the taste) of the mozzarella sourced in Glastonbury and the sourdough bases. A hearty Sunday lunch is an essential element of a weekend away, and we found one the next day at the Wykeham Arms, where roast beef was presented inside a Yorkshire pudding and came with plenty of veg and gravy, served in a variety of pots and jugs.



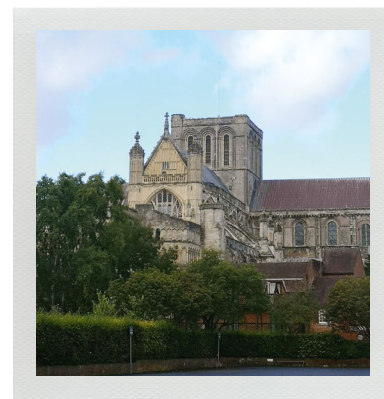
## We also liked

Moseying around the city centre with its bi-monthly Sunday street market and independent shops clustered about the cathedral. We headed to The Hambleton, a mini-department store where everything was covetable, from the prettiest glass teapot to perfectly white sneakers. Fortunately, it also has an online shop [thehambleton.com](http://thehambleton.com) for delayed gratification. The Consortium, on Jewry Street, was packed to its exposed-brick rafters with vintage homeware and industrial styling, including printers' trays, old wine boxes and wooden decorators' ladders. And Cupboard of Health health store proved handy when poor packing skills propelled us out to search for eco soap and shampoo.



## The best thing

The heart of Winchester is its glorious cathedral, which spans the gamut of medieval church architecture styles from Anglo-Saxon to late Gothic. There are many things of interest here, from Jane Austen's grave to the statue of St Joan, but walking through its doors at evensong, when the crowds had gone home was the highlight. Sitting in the nave (the world's longest, don't you know) – much like pilgrims who came to venerate St Swithun once did – enveloped by the sound of the choir singing was an uplifting, goosebump moment. A little bit of heaven right there.



*Double rooms at 61a Parchment Street cost from £155 per night.*  
[16a-winchester.co.uk](http://16a-winchester.co.uk)