



Trading places in Welwyn

Julie Lucas explores the attractive blend of historic setting and quality independents in the desirable village of Welwyn

The word idyllic is a misused word at times but is an excellent one to describe Welwyn. Set in the Mimram Valley between the new town of Stevenage and the garden city of Welwyn, its winding streets are lined with historic buildings and dominated at one end by the parish church of St Mary the Virgin. One of the historic buildings once housed the sister of Vincent Van Gogh, who wrote to his brother Theo in June 1876 that he had walked from London (leaving at four in the morning and arriving at five in the afternoon) to visit her. Three of his paintings hung in her room 'with ivy around them instead of frames'. The village is an independent unit, retaining a bank and even a fire station, as well as a wide range of independent retailers and services giving the place a vibrant feel.

Susu Boutique was established by Susan Bull 10 years ago. Before opening the High Street shop she was a consultant for John Lewis in Welwyn GC, setting up the department store's personal shopper

service. She believes good dress sense is not about age but attitude. 'I thought it was a bit disappointing that there wasn't a shop selling affordable clothes - not designer but brands not found easily,' she says. 'We are geared up to finding things to suit, but the biggest advantage is having accessories and clothes that you do not find everywhere else. You will find fantastic value on the high street but everyone is selling the same thing.'

Across the road, the charming Box of Delights lives up to its name with its range of gifts, cards and jewellery. The shop is run by Belinda Walsingham whose 'passion has always been jewellery'. She adds, 'I didn't think jewellery would stand alone in the shop, so I decided to sell gifts too. It is such a lovely trade to be in and great to buy for.' For those looking for floral gifts, the Old Welwyn Florist just up the street creates beautiful arrangements.

Interior designer Rebecca Clark aims to create stunning homes at affordable prices - sourcing furniture, lighting and

accessories directly from suppliers. If the thought of revamping your home becomes too much, Clark also runs a day spa at Ivy Cottage offering a range of treatments from Pilates to pedicures by the fire. The cottage on Codicote Road opens up like Dr Who's Tardis into beautifully decorated treatment rooms. A special feature is that nearly all the furnishings are for sale too.

Businesses have come and gone in the village, but it rarely has empty shops. One that has been a constant for decades is Hill and Company, which deals in and restores all instruments in the violin family. Not much has changed from when it first opened, and Howard Hill, the third generation of his family to take over the business, is happy that it has remained the same. 'One would hope that we are doing it right. I am not busting to change things. Like the saying goes, if it ain't broke don't fix it.'

Hill's father was a mandolin maker in Sheffield in the 1920s and the business relocated in 1955. Hill studied at the



Clockwise from above Afternoon tea at Laura Kate; wedding cake designed by Laura Moyes; Belinda Walsingham of Box of Delights; Paul Rice, Off Broadway Travel; display at Box of Delights; Susan Bull of Susu

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English School of Violin Making before joining his father. In turn, Hill's daughter has also worked for the business. Although he can play the cello, Hill says his talents lie in repairing and restoring these beautiful instruments. He now has the grandchildren of his father's customers coming in. Jayne Walker, a professional in the English National Opera and a customer for 25 years, loves that fact it's a 'proper violin shop'.

Another thriving family business is Katie's Bakery, now in its 30th year and run by the Dinsdale family. Freshly baked bread, cakes and pastries are made on the premises - the jam tarts look almost too perfect to eat. Katie Dinsdale also makes her own marmalade using ruby grapefruit and Seville oranges, 'the true marmalade oranges', she explains. As to the secret of her success: 'I think when you trade in a village you have to have time for people - this is important.' Last year the business came second in the Independent Shop of the Year category in a competition organised by local MP Grant Shapps.

Another baker is designer cake maker Laura Moyes, who opened her shop Laura Kate a year ago. Her cakes can be designed to any theme and she offers a complimentary tasting consultation to discuss ideas. Full afternoon tea is offered in her tea parlour (booking

required) or visitors can just pop in for a cupcake and cuppa. Moyes thinks it is the quaintness of the village that makes it special - 'There is a lot of history here and it has a very homely feel.'

Round the corner from the High Street on Prospect Place is bespoke holiday organiser Off Broadway Travel. Co-owner Paul Rice says the emphasis of the business is on sharing real experiences of destinations, whether it is to match a budget of £500 or £5,000. 'The internet makes everything look great but we travel a lot so can tell our clients what places are really like.'

Residents of Welwyn will certainly never go hungry with the selection of quality restaurants and pubs on their doorsteps. For Italian cuisine in contemporary surroundings try the long-established Aqua, while family-run ristorante Vita has been described on TripAdvisor as 'a little gem'.

A former coaching inn dating back 700 years, the Wellington continues to serve British classics with a twist. Customers in summer, enjoy the long evenings on the terrace. The White Hart offers British and European dishes and has an extensive tapas menu with an emphasis on relaxed shared dining. And for wine to take home, try the independent merchant Village Wines, which stocks quality vintages.



Clockwise from top left Howard Hill of Hill and Co; Katie Dinsdale with her husband Dennis and assistant Pippa, Katie's Bakery; display at Old Welwyn Florist