

# HEART & HERITAGE

Tracy Spiers and family try out Alcester's new heritage trail



Meeting Lane, Alcester

The small Warwickshire town of Alcester guards its High Street like a Roman centurion on his watch. Both carry a sense of pride and a responsibility to protect. Most towns in the country are doing their best to keep their shopping centres relevant and thriving. Alcester is no exception, but it does have something unique. It may be small compared to sister towns Stratford-upon-Avon and Redditch, but it has, in my opinion, two main qualities which will ensure its future – heart and heritage. And, whether visitors and locals alike choose to stroll or shop, they do so in a place steeped in history.

My husband Rog, myself and our youngest daughters, twins Rosie and Kezia time our visit to this Roman town perfectly. Alcester Town Council, the Chamber of Commerce and local organisations have produced a 'Visit Alcester Town Guide' complete with a heritage trail and so we become among the first to officially try out this leisurely one mile walk. Despite visiting on a soggy Saturday, we set off enthusiastically to find the 12 beautifully preserved buildings and get immersed in the town's authentic atmosphere whilst learning a few interesting facts as we go. Our starting point is **Alcester Roman Museum**, where we find out what life was like in the town in Roman times between the 1st and 4th centuries AD. It is an exciting free-of-charge exhibition, run by volunteers, celebrating what is one of the most investigated towns regarding Roman past – with over 100 archaeological digs in the past 80 years. Kezia dresses up as a Roman child and plays a game of early noughts and crosses with her sister. I enjoy studying the eclectic mix of objects which range from bone dice, wooden writing tablets, Roman coins, fish hooks and utensils as well as finding out about all the vegetables the Romans helped introduce into Britain including parsnips,



Heritage and bunting in Alcester

*'The town is an exciting mix of medieval and modern... when you walk into the historic Malt Mill Lane, it's like walking into another century'*

sweet chestnuts, grapes and rabbits! Founded by the Romans, as a walled fort and military camp in about AD47 at the junction of two Roman roads, Alcester has been a town of markets, commerce and community. As we venture through the streets and meet those who trade here in 2019, those qualities are still as strong. Inside the Museum, which opened in 2004, we meet one of the attraction's first volunteers Anne Marie Carter. On one of the wall displays is a photograph of her and her late husband Terry dressed as Romans. She says it is the history which makes Alcester such an interesting place to live.



The twins at Market Place



Church Street, Alcester

"The town is an exciting mix of medieval and modern. It is a friendly community and has this beautiful High Street, topped by the church and when you walk into the historic Malt Mill Lane, it's like walking into another century," says Anne Marie.

Another person in the life-size Roman photograph is district councillor Susan Juned, chair of Alcester Heritage Trust and Alcester War Memorial Town Hall. "The aim of this guide and heritage trail is to make sure the High Street remains vibrant and welcoming to visitors. Not everyone knows about Alcester or realises





Alcester High Street

**Old Malt House**, where in the 1500s beer was apparently safer to drink than water; we wander into one of Alcester's most picturesque streets – **Malt Mill Lane**. This has a quiet beauty of its own and spans 400 years. Here one can imagine the wealthy Tudor merchants going about their business or the needle makers in Victorian times.

It is this rich industrious heritage which makes Alcester such an exciting place to visit. As we venture into the High Street with its assortment of shops, there is a timeless quality mixed with a sense of buoyancy, pride and liveliness. As it is pouring with rain when we complete our trail, we dive into **Coffee@26**, a warm inviting hub where locals meet and greet each other over delicious cakes and coffee and visitors like us, are given a friendly cheerful welcome.

"It's very much a community town here. There is a spirit of friendliness and everyone is made to feel welcome," says owner Tracey Bassett. "I think one of our strengths is that about 99% of our businesses are independents. We like to offer our customers an individual and personal service. We know our customers by name, I know what drinks they like – it all adds to that extra care."

One of Alcester's newest shops to open is in one of the town's oldest buildings. Number Twelve the Dress Shop, owned by Haidee Hargreaves which offers pre-loved, high-end High Street designer fashion.

"I have lived in Alcester for 20 years. It's a close-knit town and we want to keep the High Street full of independent retailers," she says. "My vision would be to see footfall increased and to see all the High Street shops full and vibrant."

"The other retailers have been so supportive and they are sending their clients here and to other shops they might

like. They are helping to promote our businesses within, which is fantastic."

One of the longest standing businesses in Alcester is **Bowens Drapery**, which has had a presence in the High Street since 1897 and is number 11 on the heritage trail. Richard Bowen is the third generation of Bowens to run the shop and still sells butter-muslin and often stocks green baize for billiard tables.

"The High Street has changed. There were only individual family businesses then and I would like to think this is one of them. It does have nice buildings, full of character and Alcester is in a good situation, being away from the bigger places."

Whilst Modern Alcester's businesses may not all be run by individual families, a high percentage of them are locally-owned. Almost every pub, restaurant, café and takeaway is either an independent or one of a friendly local chain and many take care to source their produce locally. And when it comes to food, October is a great time to visit and it will give those who don't yet know Alcester a chance to see the heart and heritage of this particular High Street. One of the jewels in this community's social calendar is the Alcester and Forest of Arden Food Festivals which take place in May and October. On October 19 (9am-5pm), the

High Street, Church Street and Henley Street will be full of food and drink stalls. The festival, which attracts over 10,000 visitors to the town and provides free park and ride from Mill Industrial Park on the A435 near Alcester, is free to attend and is a fun and fabulous day out. Paid parking will also be available on the old football pitch weather permitting.

It's the 10th year anniversary of these food festivals and there are now over a hundred exhibitors offering the very best of cheeses, pies, artisan breads, cakes, fresh and cured meats and sausages, fruit and vegetables, pickles, oils and preserves, kitchen equipment, a pig roast, award-winning street food, handmade chocolates, local beers, ciders, wines and spirits. Individual local shops will be contributing and Alcester's welcoming pubs and cafes will be open. The Organisers' Information Stand will be close to St Nicholas Church.

"For a perfect foodie day out, forage through the food festival stalls and enjoy wonderful food and drink," says Alison Brown, volunteer Sales Director.

"Our Food Festivals are run and managed entirely by volunteers and we would like to thank the many individuals and organisations who make our wonderful event possible."

The Romans traded across Europe including towns like Alcester, to export all sorts of products. The goods on offer in Alcester 2019 may be slightly different, but they are sold with passion, integrity and care and if the shop keepers in this High Street remain united in their dedicated cause – this High Street will be trading and thriving for many years to come. ♦

[www.visitalcester.com](http://www.visitalcester.com)  
[www.alcester-tc.gov.uk](http://www.alcester-tc.gov.uk)  
[www.alcesterfoodfestival.org.uk](http://www.alcesterfoodfestival.org.uk)



Alcester's antique wine press

### KEY DATES FOR THE DIARY

**September 30-October 1:** Mop Fair, High Street.

**October 2-5:** AMT Company Made in Dagenham, Palace Theatre.

**October 3:** Court Leet Elections, Town Hall.

**October 5:** Rotary Big Breakfast, Town Hall.

**October 6:** Seco Alcester 10k Race, High Street.

**October 11:** New To You Fashion Show, St Nicholas Church.

**October 19:** Food Festival/Church Tower Tour, Town Centre.

**October 26:** Poppy Appeal Launch, Methodist Church.

**October TBC:** High Bailiff's Church Service, St Nicholas Church.

**November 7:** Church Restoration Luncheon Concert, St Nicholas Church.

**November 9:** RBL Remembrance Concert, St Nicholas Church.

**November 10:** Remembrance Day Parade, High Street.

**November 11:** Armistice Day Service, St Nicholas Church Green.

**November 16:** Christmas Festival, St Nicholas Church.

**December 6:** St Nicholas Night, High Street.

**December 22:** Town Carols, St Nicholas Church.



The Old Town Hall

that behind the more modern facades of some of our buildings, there are Medieval timber frames," explains. "We are all committed to encouraging and supporting the High Street."

Building number two on our heritage trail is **The Old Rectory**, an interesting example of Georgian architecture. Stage-coach travel was at its peak from 1750 to 1850 when the town had at least seven coaching inns. This building is directly in front of the **Parish Church of St Nicholas** and what is known as the Greville Tomb. The oldest part of the church tower dates back to 1350. Inside the church, a memorial plaque on the altar rail honours polar explorer parish-born George Frederick Jackson while a painted alabaster effigy commemorates the lives of Lord of the Manor Sir Fulke Greville, his baroness wife, Elizabeth nee Willoughby and their 15 sons and daughters. Their grandson, Fulke III, became Earl of Warwick and paid £300 in 1618 to build Alcester's Grade I listed **War Memorial Town Hall** as a market hall, number 8 on the heritage trail. His Court Leet charged traders tolls and fined them if their produce wasn't good enough as well as jailing offenders in The Hole – the

basement prison.

Our ramble takes us to Butter Street, a small curved medieval street, so named because it was here where farmers' wives sold butter as the street got little sun and the butter didn't melt. We look out for **Churchill House**, the only Baroque-style house in Alcester, even though it is just a façade. Behind it, the ancient half-timbered building reveals its true age. Meanwhile we discover Warwickshire's oldest inhabited house in Henley Street, once called Sheep Street as it was full of livestock on market days until the 19th century. The house dates back to 1385. We then venture into **Church Street**, where we spot two angels on a building called The Angel, a former large coaching inn where Queen Victoria was reputed to have lodged when she was a Princess. After discovering the impressive half-timbered high twin-gabled building, **The**



Alcester Food Festival



Kezia dresses as a young Roman



Anne Marie Carter in front of a picture of her dressed as a Roman to the right and her late husband Terry to her left