

Camping & Caravanning

Camping & Caravanning Club

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Beautiful Bowland

We set off to explore
Lancashire's
last wilderness



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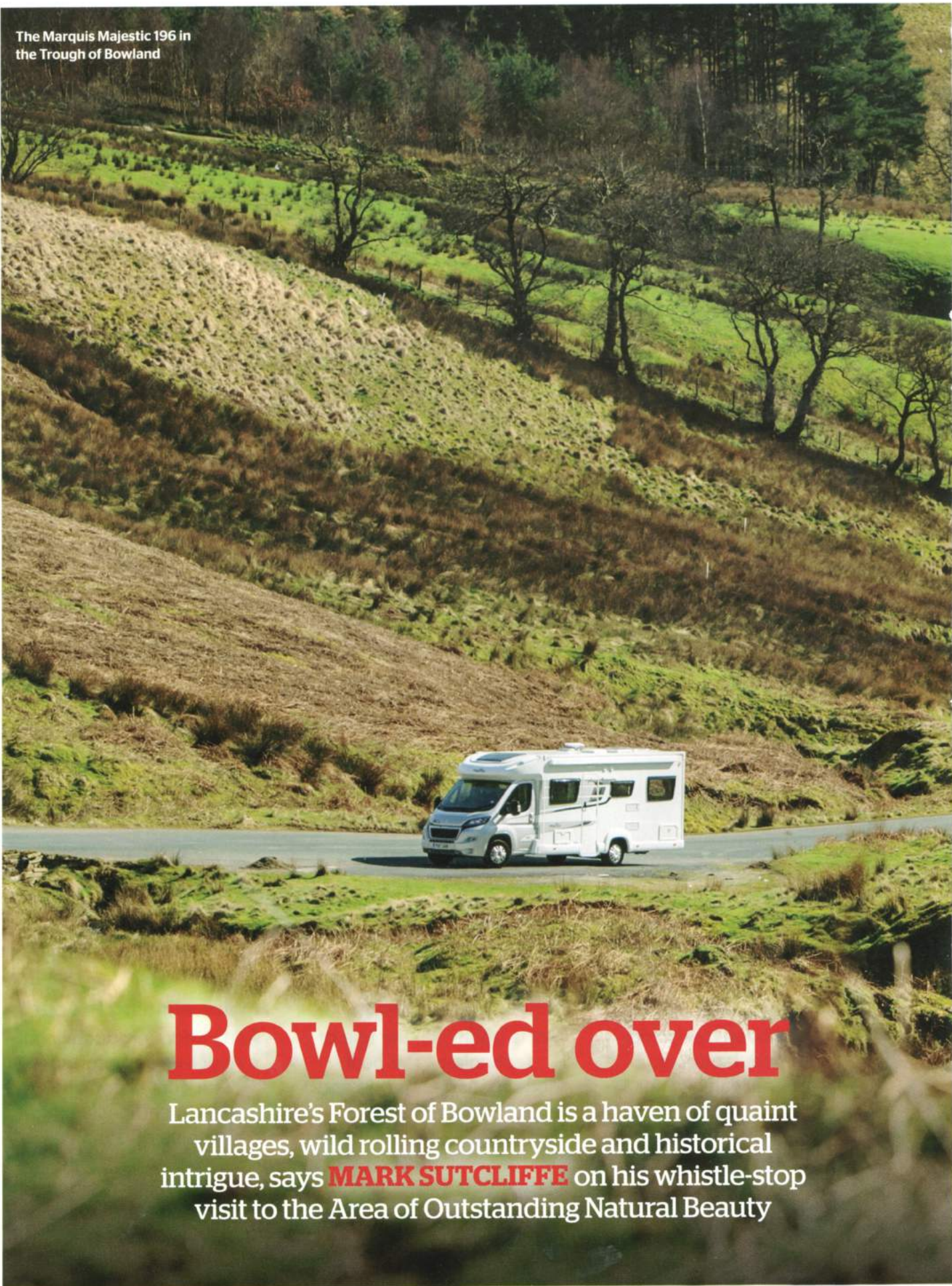
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INSIDE: Sample the flavours of Exmoor, **PAGE 29.**

Enjoy a lochside yurt on a Scottish island, **PAGE 46.**

We check out Land Rover's all-new Discovery, **PAGE 73.**

Hundreds of meets in our Out & About section, **PAGE 83.**



The Marquis Majestic 196 in
the Trough of Bowland

Bowl-ed over

Lancashire's Forest of Bowland is a haven of quaint villages, wild rolling countryside and historical intrigue, says **MARK SUTCLIFFE** on his whistle-stop visit to the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



TUCKED UP between the limestone peaks of the Yorkshire Dales and the foothills of the Lake District, the Forest of Bowland

(www.forestofbowland.com) in the north east corner of Lancashire is one of England's last few upland wildernesses.

Despite its proximity to these well-loved national parks, my wife Sally and I managed to overlook this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) until recently, making a beeline for its neighbours.

And although this bucolic backwater may seem a long way off the beaten track, some cartographers actually reckon the geographical centre of Britain is to be found in the heart of the Forest.

So, with three days to spare near the end of the summer holidays, Sally and I headed up >>



Head online to www.myccc.co.uk/ features for details of a half-day river walk direct from Clitheroe Club Site



the M6 and turned right on to the A59 at Preston and pitched up at Clitheroe Club Site.

Nestling beside the River Ribble on the outskirts of town, just a stone's throw from the boundary of the AONB, Clitheroe Club Site is the perfect base for a foray into the forest.

Overwhelmingly rural, this natural oasis stretches from the mill towns of the industrial West Pennines to the fringes of the historic port of Lancaster – the former capital of the powerful County Palatine of Lancashire – an autonomous area ruled by nobility.

On the southern boundary of the Forest, dominating the skyline above the bustling market town of Clitheroe, broods the whaleback ridge of Pendle – an unmistakable local landmark and a geographically distinct but integral part of the AONB.

WITCHES AND WONDERS

This is 'witch country', where some diabolical goings-on under the steep slopes of Pendle led to the notorious Lancashire Witch Trials in 1612. The villages lying in the shadow of Pendle to the east of the summit – Barley, Newchurch and Roughlee – resonate with the echoes of witchcraft, even though the truth behind the legend is somewhat less devilish than the tourist trail suggests.

There are many routes to the summit of Pendle. We took the challenging but scenic one up from the picture-postcard village of Downham, tucked away under the hill's north-western flank.



Clockwise from top: Pendle Hill stands 557 metres high; Clitheroe Castle overlooks the town; a tourist sign for the Lancashire Witches Driving Trail

Clitheroe itself is something of a gateway to the forest, built around a limestone outcrop upon which the keep of a Norman castle perches. We climbed to the foot of the keep and marvelled at the magnificent panorama unfolding around us. To the north, the Bowland Fells and the uplands of the forest; to the east, the limestone country of the Yorkshire Dales and to the south, the brooding hulk of Pendle.

The town is the hub of the local community with plenty going on throughout the year and has a good sprinkling of specialist shops – including a fantastic independent wine merchant, pubs, eateries and a twice-weekly market.

An extremely popular food festival takes place in the marketplace every August, attracting thousands of visitors from all over the country to sample the wares of strictly local producers from within a few miles of the town.

They also take beer extremely seriously in these parts and visitors will find an excellent choice of local ales in pubs across town, but the biggest draw for real ale aficionados is Holmes Mill. Located just a 15-minute walk from the Club Site, this huge Victorian mill has been converted into a vast brewpub and beer hall, with an on-site brewery



and up to 24 real ales on hand pump, showcased on what is claimed to be Britain's longest continuous bar.

But things soon calm down to the north of Clitheroe, where the only roads across this 300-square-mile expanse of wilderness are two single-track lanes and the remains of a Roman road, meaning the area's rich wildlife is largely left to its own devices.

FOREST IN NAME

Bowland is only a forest in the medieval sense of the word – meaning a hunting ground for the nobility – and the landscape is dominated by deep, intimate valleys and elevated moorland punctuated by the occasional stark



Clockwise from this picture: Nearing the end of the Trough of Bowland; a sign near the end of the Trough road; a hen harrier; Dunsop Bridge is thought to be the centre of the United Kingdom



outcrop of rugged millstone grit. In the Middle Ages, wild boar and wolves would have roamed the forest, but today the lower lying areas provide verdant grazing for dairy cattle while the uplands are home to hardy flocks of Swaledale or Herdwick sheep and herds of wild deer.

Much of this unspoiled landscape continues to be owned and managed by large estates such as the Duchy of Lancaster. The Queen also owns large swathes of the forest and in an unguarded moment a number of years ago, apparently confided to a friend that she would like to retire here.

It was, after all, identified as the centre of her kingdom, when

cartographers pinpointed the geographical centre of the United Kingdom (excluding offshore islands) to a field near Whitendale Hanging Stones, four miles north of Dunsop Bridge.

For several years, to the bafflement of local residents, this unassuming hamlet was invaded by hordes of day-trippers wanting to take their picture at the centre of Britain. However, the hysteria has died back and the only remaining reference to Bowland's unique status is in a sign welcoming visitors to Dunsop Bridge and a small plaque next to the village phone box.

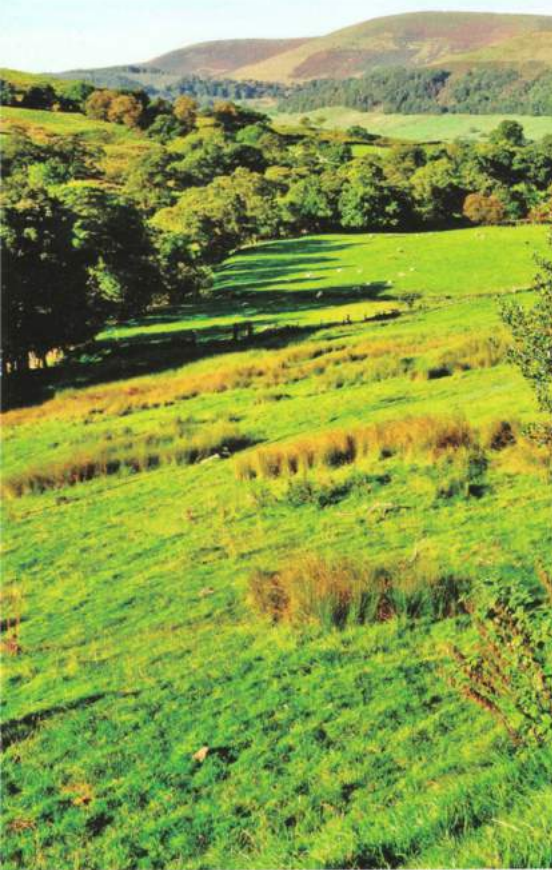
The precise grid reference is SD6418856541 but a coffee and a cake at the delightful Puddleducks Café next to the bridge itself, rather than a trudge across an unremarkable field brandishing a GPS, is probably a more rewarding reason to visit Dunsop Bridge.

Despite the majority of the forest being under private ownership, access to the uplands and valleys is – on the whole – excellent, thanks to the establishment of a large tract of open access land and enlightened stewardship by local farmers and land-owners.

Dippers, kingfishers and rare ring ouzels – a blackbird with a white collar – flit about in the valleys, while the upland areas are the domain of merlins, peregrine falcons and the rare hen harrier – the AONB's official symbol.

We only got a distant view of this iconic bird of prey as it is under serious pressure in this – its last English stronghold. Unless local landowners and the RSPB can reverse a steep decline, it could go the same way as the golden eagle and become extinct in England. The next couple of summers may afford visitors the last fleeting glimpses of this elegant raptor as nesting pairs re-establish their mating bond and perform their spectacular courtship ritual known as the skydance. »

Forest of Bowland



Left: A view across the Forest of Bowland. This picture: Stargazing near Bowland Knotts

A STROLL FOR ALL SEASONS

We visited the forest in late summer but perhaps the best time to see Bowland is in the autumn, when the woodland that lines the pretty River Hodder has donned its autumn garb by the middle of September and a heady mixture of mist and woodsmoke fills the valleys.

The Forest is criss-crossed with hundreds of miles of footpaths and bridleways and exploring these glorious valleys under a canopy of gold, amber and auburn makes for a fabulous short break.

We followed an easy circular walk direct from the site gate along scenic stretches of both the Ribble and Hodder before returning across rolling pastureland offering pleasant views of Pendle Hill and the castle (go to www.myccc.co.uk/features for the route). A short drive to the gorgeous villages of Chipping, Slaidburn or Dunsop Bridge gets visitors right into the heart of Bowland's hill country, where there are dozens of hiking options.

These close-knit farming communities are usually home to a thriving village pub, a couple of cafés and plenty of hearty local produce – the ideal reward after an invigorating ten-mile hike over the hills.

The high-level routes over the tops can be extremely demanding but sticking to low-level hikes through scenic valleys such as Langden or Hareden provides a flavour of the forest landscape without the risk of blisters or getting lost.


While exploring on foot is undoubtedly the best way to get to know Bowland, with limited time at our disposal we decided to take a bit of a road trip. Leaving the Club Site, we crossed the Ribble and Hodder to Chipping before plunging back into the densely-wooded Hodder Valley to Whitewell, Dunsop Bridge and then over the steep and winding Trough of Bowland to Victoria Tower, where the

huge views out across Morecambe Bay took our breath away.

From here, we dropped down into the Lune Valley and followed the river to Caton and Hornby before climbing back to Bentham and over the rugged heart of Bowland via the spectacular Cross o' Greet road to Slaidburn, then along the Hodder to Newton, over the steep pass to the chocolate box village of Waddington and back over the Ribble to the Club Site.

And after exploring the wonderful scenery of the forest by day, we couldn't risk sampling Bowland's sparkling nightlife. A number of locations within the AONB have secured Dark Sky Discovery status, meaning that on a clear night, budding astronomers can spot thousands of celestial objects without light pollution compromising the view. We spotted constellations, star clusters, nebulae and even the odd shooting star – all visible to the naked eye at a stretch – but better viewed through binoculars or a small telescope.

Star-gazing events (www.forestofbowland.com/star-gazing) take place during the autumn and winter months at various locations and are very popular so advance booking is essential.

With so much to do both day and night, we'd enjoyed an action-packed mini-break – the perfect taster trip for our next Bowland adventure. 

■ With thanks to Marquis Lancashire (www.marquisleisure.co.uk) for the loan of the Marquis Majestic 196 featured. The 196 is a six-berth motorhome based on the Elddis Autoquest. Prices start at £51,629.



To book your pitch at Clitheroe Club Site (pictured below) head online to www.myccc.co.uk/clitheroe or call 024 7647 5426.

