



COURTESY OF WEST DEAN COLLEGE

The Creative Quarter is home to a mix of artists' studios, galleries, boutiques and cafés

FANTASTIC FOLKESTONE

Exciting things are happening in the Kent port town of Folkestone, with creativity and a celebration of the area's history and independence at its heart

WORDS & IMAGES NORMAN MILLER

It's not just space travel that benefits from billionaires keen to splash the cash – towns can too. Step forward Folkestone. The moneybags who has driven transformation here is Roger de Haan, who has sunk nearly £100 million over 15 years to turn this historic coastal town into a vibrant Kent cultural hub. His desire to help Folkestone stems from the town being the birthplace – and continuing HQ – of the Saga empire which his parents established most famously to sell holidays to the over-50s. Still resident in the town, de Haan can spare the money, having sold the Saga group in 2004 for over £1.3 billion.

Though it first came to prominence as a Saxon port, then part of the wealthy Cinque Ports economic clique, significant Iron Age finds plus the enduring remains of a 1st-century hillside Roman villa prove people liked this coastal spot way back. Folkestone's stylish historic heyday, though, came in the Victorian and Edwardian era, when its villa-lined streets, green-swathed seafront and luxury train/ferry link to Boulogne made it a seaside getaway for the grand and well-to-do, including Edward VII and his mistress Alice Keppel.

The Victorian ideal of the 'parkland resort' shaped Folkestone. The lawns and lush plantings of The Leas form a beautiful green promenade along the seafront and clifftops towards the posh enclave of Sandgate, while arched 19th-century promenades frame Sunny Sands beach by the harbour. The town's architecture jumbles Gothic piles, Edwardian terraces and cosy brick cottages.



Bill Woodrow's sculpture *The Ledge*, on the Lower Leas Coastal Promenade



Rare pottery by Eric Ravilious is among the treasures at Rennie's Seaside Modern

But, as with many Victorian seaside towns, Folkestone was plagued by unemployment and fell into disrepair. Step forward Roger de Haan, who has invested in the Creative Quarter – the hub of Folkestone's culture-fuelled rejuvenation – along with the harbour regeneration and cultural festivals headlined by a prestigious art triennial, whose rescheduled 2020 iteration is presently brightening up the town until early November. Tontine Street and The Old High Street delineate the Creative Quarter, along with Rendezvous Street – their hip spots jostle pleasingly with the medieval lanes embracing the ancient parish church of St Mary and St Eanswythe. A short walk away is a village enclave along Bouverie Road West, where Strode & Co. offers a distinctive 'inventory of antiques and curiosities'.

Tips for the first-time visitor

- Triennial artist details are on the Creative Folkestone website (creativefolkestone.org.uk), but you can also pick up free art trail maps at the town hall on Guildhall Street or at The Quarterhouse.
- Steep Street Coffee House is a brilliant place to recharge over a cuppa, serving up delicious cakes and caffeine amid bookshelves heaving with poetry and local literature, classics and coffee-table tomes (steepstreet.co.uk).
- Retro music fans should time their visit to Folkestone to coincide with its annual ska festival Skabour. Taking place on 17-19 September, the event encompasses both new young bands and legendary acts (skabour.co.uk).
- Overlooking the seafront at Sandgate, Spade House is a grandly stylish mansion that is not only the former home of sci-fi author H. G. Wells where he wrote many of his famous books, but also a Grade II-listed jewel designed by Arts & Crafts visionary Charles Voysey.

The striking modern white box of The Quarterhouse arts centre commands Tontine Street – its facade sometimes likened to a giant cheese grater – flanked by little galleries and studio spaces, where you can catch contemporary art and design at The Stables Studios, and scan poems by local writers displayed in another window a few doors along.

Tontine Street runs along to a pair of little harbours where diverse dining outlets line the quaysides, including the venerable Bob's Seafood food van on the waterside cobbles of The Stade, the Michelin-starred Rocksalt restaurant (see Eat) and the Lighthouse Champagne Bar, whose old tower is adorned with Ian Hamilton Finlay's thought-provoking suggestion that 'Weather is a Third to Place and Time'.

Folkestone's modern art DNA is visible all around the harbours and west along the seafront. A striking pink toy-like house by Richard Woods sits surreally in the middle of one harbour; an Antony Gormley metal man stands in a subterranean quayside nook, peering out over the ocean; and Lubaina Himid's *Jelly Mould Pavilion* provides a pretty focal point in a sea of shingle.

A giant bulb mural by Michael Craig-Martin marks the start of The Old High Street, whose array of funky shops include a clutch of brilliant vintage spots, as well as places like The Upcycled Trading Company where Claire Tristram sells artfully upcycled lighting and homemade accessories, plus paint and other stuff to allow others to hone their upcycling skills. As part of that, Claire plans to run courses at a new Upcycling Design Academy on Mill Bay from September.

Vintage film posters are the thing at neighbouring Paradiso, where Stephen Blakemore sells great examples of classic cinema graphics dating back to the 1930s. His shop had roots in a teenage passion for posters at the local cinema, where he would 'beg the manager' to let him have the sheets whenever the programme changed, until his collection grew to the size that a shop seemed a good idea.

Fans of mid-century British design beat a path to Paul and Karen Rennie's eponymous shop Rennie's Seaside Modern, where the duo showcase an eye for objects honed by careers at elite auctioneers (Paul for Sotheby's, Karen for Christie's). Each brings a passion for different things to the equation, with Paul's love of print and graphics complemented by Karen's ceramic and textile finds. 'I like the idea of a shop that sells little things for £5, up to vintage ceramics for thousands,' says Karen. The latter include rare pots by Eric Ravilious as well as a wonderful Peter Blake plate.



Jelly Mould Pavilion, a reimagining of the traditional seaside shelter by Lubaina Himid



Quirky independent shops line The Old High Street in the heart of the Creative Quarter



Reclaimed lighting at Workshop No. 29, known for its industrial and rustic vintage stock

Must-see

2021 Folkestone Triennial
Running until 2 November, this increasingly acclaimed outdoor art event across the town presents nearly 30 newly commissioned site-specific artworks by internationally acclaimed artists. Among highlights, Gilbert & George have placed a selection of their distinctive pictures on billboards and poster sites, Belgian artist Jacqueline Poncelet has set a variety of giant lenses into a wall of the old Ship Street gasworks site, while Mike Stubbs has created a memorably customised hot-rod car to dramatise the damage caused by fossil fuels.
○ creativefolkestone.org.uk

Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway
Just a few miles from Folkestone, New Romney provides the starting point for the wonderful miniature steam trains of the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway, whose little toytown carriages bear passengers along the rim of lovely Romney Marsh, through medieval Hythe and then on to the otherworldly shingle desert landscape of Dungeness. Among various special events, on 5 September there will be a vintage bus rally at New Romney Station.
○ [New Romney Station, New Romney; rhdr.org.uk](http://NewRomneyStation.com)





A charming period café sits at the bottom of the Victorian water-powered funicular lift

Just off the top of The Old High Street, Moira Symons crams racks of vintage threads into Courting Lily. While some items date back to the– 1920s, the core of the stock is from the 1960s and 70s. ‘It’s still so wearable, with something for everyone,’ says Moira. Sourcing stock is an endless task but a pleasurable one. ‘It’s like an addiction!’

A couple of hundred yards away on Rendezvous Street, I’m drawn by a blue plaque commemorating a gig by Jimi Hendrix as much as the vintage salvage piled by what was once the Royal Albert Hotel but is now the fantastic Workshop No. 29 overseen by Tom Williams. Tom’s taste for industrial chic – which he calls ‘the ultimate recycle’ – underpins ongoing interior design work which his shop complements. Stock is sourced via auctions and scouting trips, ‘But people find us too,’ says Tom, highlighting a striking set of yellow New York City traffic lights which someone recently brought in. The shop is a stop for TV production crews, while Tom also runs workshops to guide people in the ways of upcycling.

Folkestone’s artwork trail extends all the way along The Leas to the suburb of Sandgate, where a few venerable antiques shops – plus Tom Williams’s other Workshop No. 29 store – on the High Street vie for attention with several of nearly 50 sandcastle-like Martello towers built in the early 1800s, when fear of invasion by Napoleon haunted the area.

Four miles further west, medieval Hythe is one of several pleasing companion places to visit. As well as pottering along the tranquil waters of the Royal Military Canal, be sure to take in the eerie ossuary beneath St Leonard’s Church, whose piles of human bones provide thought-provoking counterpoint to the bustle on the nearby High Street. There is also a pair of the south coast’s most epic beaches at Greatstone and Littlestone, their vast sands perfect for bracing walks as well as brilliant sporty activities like land-yachting. Nearby New Romney, meanwhile, retains reminders of its former eminence as one of the original medieval Cinque Ports, including an imposing Norman church and some fine medieval houses.

From the UK’s finest concentration of 21st-century public art in Folkestone to this timeless wild shore, there’s a lot to savour in this dozen miles of Kentish coast. 📍

The essentials

VISIT

Courting Lily 3 Church Street; courtinglily.com

Paradiso 46 The Old High Street; paradisofolkestone.com

The Quarterhouse 49 Tontine Street; creativefolkestone.org.uk/folkestone-quarterhouse

Rennies Seaside Modern 47 The Old High Street; rennart.co.uk

The Stables Studios 35-37 Tontine Street; creativefolkestone.org.uk

Strode & Co. 39 Bouverie Road West; strode.co

The Upcycled Trading Company 48 The Old High Street; see Facebook
Workshop No. 29 29 Rendezvous Street (and 97 Sandgate High Street, Sandgate); workshopnumber29.com

EAT

Rocksalt Mark Sargeant’s harbourside restaurant boasts panoramic views best enjoyed on the terrace cantilevered out over the water. Local seasonal produce is treated with gusto in dishes like Folkestone huss with cockle popcorn and samphire, or grilled plaice with grape and sorrel dressing.

📍 4-5 Fish Market; rocksaltfolkestone.co.uk

Pick Up Pintxos

Though trained at the Michelin three-starred Arzak back in Spain, chef Gianni Modena brings a far more approachable style to delicious Basque tapas and larger plate dishes, such as a Basque stew of broad beans, peas and asparagus, tortilla with white tuna and tomatoes, or grilled Iberico pork with

onion and pine nut purée and burnt orange salsa.

📍 2-4 South Street; pickuppintxos.com

STAY

The Relish

Carved from a vast Regency townhouse, this chic B&B offers 10 luxurious individually styled bedrooms enlivened by vibrant contemporary wallpapers and bright splashes of colour, and boasting sumptuous beds by Hypnos. There are complimentary evening drinks too.

📍 4 Augusta Gardens; hotelrelish.co.uk

Rocksalt

As a complement to the restaurant, there are four beautiful bedrooms named after local fishermen, and situated above the posh restaurant’s casual dining sister space The Smokehouse. Rooms major on appealing industrial chic: exposed brickwork, sturdy vintage lighting, antique wrought-iron beds, plus brilliant sea views. Book Valentine if you fancy your own little balcony too.

📍 4-5 Fish Market; rocksaltfolkestone.co.uk

GETTING THERE

Direct high-speed trains from London St Pancras whizz to Folkestone in just under an hour, with considerably slower services also running from London Victoria. By car, it’s around 70 miles from London down the M20. There is also excellent access to the Continent via Eurostar and ferries from nearby Dover.