

What's the big deal about Bruton?

*A quiet Somerset town has suddenly become a magnet for the wealthy and glamorous. **Zoe Dare Hall** finds out why*

The arrival of art gallery Hauser & Wirth in the Somerset countryside has brought new glamour to Bruton and put it on the map for visitors from all over the world. But for a surprising number of celebrities, this unassuming town needs little introduction.

Where is it

The small farming town of Bruton sits between Yeovil and Frome in South Somerset. It's home to 3,000 residents, three public schools and traces throughout of its history, including ancient streets of stone and stucco houses, the 14th-century Church of St Mary and 16th-century dovecote that stands on a hilltop overlooking the town.

Bruton's weekend homeowning contingent from London whizz down the A303 or catch the 90-minute direct train from Paddington to nearby Castle Cary. Bruton's lack of a direct rail service to London (it's on the Bristol-Weymouth line) is perhaps what makes the town feel off the beaten track and charmingly offbeat, as seen in some of its quirkier shops such as No Naked Windows (which sells soft furnishings) and Matt's Kitchen, a cosy period cottage on the high street where cook Matt Watson serves a single dish of the day in his own living room.

Medieval Wells is a half-hour's drive away, Georgian Bath just a little further, and on a clear day, you can see Glastonbury.

What's there

King's Bruton, the day

and boarding school that soon celebrates its 500th anniversary, dominates the town. Near one of its many buildings are ancient stepping stones across the River Brue, a popular spot for summer paddlers. The other private

schools are Bruton School for Girls and, just off Lusty Gardens – no sniggering, please – is Sexey's, named after Hugh Sexey, Queen Elizabeth I's royal auditor.

But that's all ancient history. What is making Bruton's name now is the Hauser & Wirth art gallery, which has attracted more than 100,000 visitors since it opened in July 2014. Its owners Iwan and Manuela Wirth (Iwan was recently named by Forbes as the US's fourth most powerful art dealer, worth \$225million) live locally and saw the derelict 17th-century Durslade Farm as a ripe opportunity to add a Hauser & Wirth Somerset to their collection of galleries in London, New York, LA and Zurich.

Gigantic underpants that light up in the dark hang between the buildings and there's a vast Louise Bourgeois spider in the gardens. A six-bedroom holiday cottage is like no other, with murals and video installations in quirkily designed rooms and, across its façade, Martin Creed's neon sign stating "Everything is going to be alright". The gallery also houses the Roth Bar & Grill, which is permanently packed.

"The gallery has brought contemporary art to an audience who wouldn't have

considered it before – and it has brought people to Bruton who never would have come here before," says sculptor Lucy Glendinning, who works in a studio converted by her architect husband Mark Merer.

Another attraction is At The Chapel, a restaurant, bar, bakery and boutique hotel on the high street that manages to be beautiful, trendy and immediately welcoming. Owners Catherine Butler, who previously ran a

chain of Café Med restaurants in London, and her partner Ahmed Sidki, a furniture designer, bought the derelict chapel on a whim 10 years ago when visiting friends.

"I never thought I'd live in the countryside, but Bruton has an energy about it," says Butler, who also runs the Roth Bar & Grill. "Each time I came, I kept bumping into people I knew. It felt like half of west London came from

Somerset and the other half were buying here for a new life with their children. Bruton ought to come with a health warning: if you come here for a weekend, you'll soon be back property-hunting."

She and Sidki began to convert the chapel's cavernous space into their home before opting for something far more sociable. "I wanted a place that provided four things – food, wine, friends



and art. Now we're like the local community centre," says Butler – only it's far glitzier. Its walls display art on loan from Hauser & Wirth and an events programme sees Cameron Mackintosh, a local, host film screenings, Dominic West pop in for a chat and the town's 15 published authors hold book launches.

"Bruton has a hip and cool environment. It's very creative

and wealthy and everyone mixes. You can find yourself at a party in someone's garden, among farmers and celebrities, discussing the nutritional value of grass."

Who lives in Bruton

On his death bed, John Steinbeck described the six months he spent in Bruton in 1959 as the happiest of his life. "Time loses all its meaning. The peace I have dreamed about is here," he wrote.

Today, a starry roll call of names live in the town or on its doorstep. There's the showbusiness set (Mackintosh, Rhys Ifans, Sam Taylor-Wood and husband Aaron Johnson) and the fashion crew (Phoebe Philo, Bill Amberg, Alice Temperley and Solange Azagury). Don McCullin lives in neighbouring Batcombe, as does Mariela Frostrup, while Kevin McCloud is up the road. Ben Goldsmith and Nicolas Cage are also locals and it's rumoured that Stella McCartney has bought a farm in a valley nearby.

What it's like

You might imagine Bruton to be either chocolate-box twee or Notting Hill with cows. Surprisingly, it is neither. There is money aplenty – Edward Clarkson, a partner at [The Buying Solution](#), Knight Frank's buying arm, says his typical client has £2 million or more to spend on an old rectory or farmhouse – but flash it isn't. There are juice bars and vintage shops on the high street, but also a couple of unreconstructed pubs and a Spar minimarket.

Bruton's appeal has been hugely boosted by Hauser & Wirth, say local buying agents. "The gallery could have a similar effect on

everything, from pubs to house prices, in the same way that the Daylesford organic farm shop has in the Cotswolds," says Clarkson. George Wade from Property Vision adds: "A decade ago, the town was seen as value for money compared with Sherborne or Shaftesbury. Now it has an arty Somerset vibe, plus the prep schools."

More than anything, though, people are attracted to Bruton because of other people, says Clarkson. "It has become fashionable with celebrities and also a lot of London hedge fund types. When I ask 'why Bruton?', it's always because they have friends there."

Cheesemaker Tom Calver, who runs Westcombe Dairy, is surprised to see the area he grew up in now sprinkled with stardust. "Bruton has changed a lot for the better in the last few years and we're lucky that the people who come down here have a bit of class and know how to do things properly," says Calver, who holds an annual beer and cheese festival.

What you can buy

There's an opportunity to become pivotal in the local community as the post office is for sale, on the ground floor of a Georgian house with a four-bedroom property above, for £600,000 (01935 589017; [jackson-stops.co.uk](#)).

Prices are up by 6 per cent on a year ago, says Zoopla, and in the town centre, cottages cost from £300,000-£500,000, including a two-bedroom 17th-century semi-detached cottage with views of Glastonbury, just under a mile from Bruton station, for £390,000

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(01373 470000; [allenandharris.co.uk](#)). There's also a five-bedroom detached house built in 1714 for £447,000 (01963 858003;

[colbertsmith.co.uk](#)) or, at £595,000 (01935 812323; [humberts.com](#)), a five-bedroom apartment in a country house part-designed by Edward Lutyens.

Towards the top of the market is a six-bedroom detached house with 2.9 acres for £1.35 million (01935 589026; [knightfrank.com](#)) or in nearby Batcombe, on the edge of the Mendip Hills, Savills (01225 474660; [savills.com](#)) is marketing Baileys Lane Farm for £2.5 million, a contemporary six-bedroom house with 57 acres.

"A slower pace of life and more space" draws London buyers, in particular, to Bruton, says Philip German-Ribon, director of Jackson-Stops & Staff's Sherborne office. Property Vision's Wade also emphasises the peace factor. "For £1.25-£2 million, you can buy a five or six-bedroom farmhouse with a few acres and peace and quiet."





— ALAMY; REUTERS —

Bruton force (clockwise from top): the picturesque Church of St Mary; the buzzing At The Chapel restaurant and the Hauser & Wirth art gallery. Stella McCartney (left) is rumoured to have bought nearby