



Worcester Cathedral on a fine spring evening.
Picture: COLINDAMCKIE / 123RF.COM

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TRAVEL

A DASH OF WORCESTER

This friendly university town set in lush English countryside is brimming with old battle stories and historic bars, writes Chris Bishop



Left: Battle of Worcester re enactors drill in the High Street. Picture: CHRIS BISHOP

by day or night.

Worcester has much to commend it for tourists. It is big enough to keep you busy, yet small enough to get around quickly on foot. It is a university town, so there are plenty of decent restaurants, cafes and more than a few nightspots.

They used to say there was a pub in Worcester for every day of the year – not so many now but there are plenty, from bierkellers to cocktail bars. They include the hostelry where King Charles II escaped through the back door, during the Battle of Worcester in 1651, as Oliver Cromwell's dragoons kicked down the front door.

A stone outside the present-day King Charles House in New Street commemorates this narrow escape.

This rich history attracts many. The Battle of Worcester lasted for eight hours and left more than 3,000 dead – the bodies of men and horses blocked the streets. It changed English history forever, securing a brief republic and ushering in more religious freedom.

More than 13,000 soldiers for King Charles II fortified Worcester against 30,000 of Cromwell's troops – the population of the city, at the time, was a mere 7,000.

Some relics of that battle survive. The Commandery, from whence the Royalists directed the battle, is now a very well put together museum.

Fort Royal, once a redoubt bristling with cannons high above the city, has been, preserved as a park. On the day of the battle, Cromwell's troops massacred more than a 1,000 troops defending Fort Royal in less than an hour, before turning the guns on the city. The view from Fort Royal over the rooftops to Worcester Cathedral is stunning and little-changed. It is easy to see how much havoc the cannonade would have caused.

US founders John Adams and Thomas Jefferson travelled to Fort Royal in the 18th century and said Englishmen should make a pilgrimage there every year to recall the struggle for freedom. There wasn't much freedom for the losers. The victors herded more than 8,000 mainly Scottish prisoners, taken at the Battle of Worcester, into the cathedral, awaiting their shipping to the Caribbean and US as indentured slaves.

The magnificent Worcester Cathedral is a huge draw for the tourists and a monument to hard work and perspiration. It has been a place of prayer for 14 centuries and it took more than 400 years to build from stone floated down the River Severn, from nearby quarries, and hauled into place by rope and human hand.

Scores of generations of craftsmen thrived in Worcester, passing on their skills down from father to son, in centuries of construction. In the nave of the Cathedral is the tomb of King John, in real life the signatory of the Magna Carta – England's early version of South Africa's constitution – and in literature the hammer of outlaw Robin Hood. On his deathbed, he instructed courtiers to haul his remains from



Worcester Cathedral has been a place of prayer for 14 centuries. Picture: MICHAEL D BECKWITH / FLICKR



The tomb of King John in Worcester Cathedral.
Picture: MIKE FINN / FLICKR



The Worcester porcelain ordered by Lord Nelson, who perished at the Battle of Trafalgar before he could collect it. Picture: MUSEUM OF ROYAL WORCESTER

the balcony during the evening to the cheers of a massive crowd. The city changed the name of Cooken Street to Copenhagen Street to commemorate one of Lord Nelson's victories.

The great man ordered some of the famous Worcester porcelain for his breakfast table, but sadly perished at the Battle of Trafalgar before he could collect it. The set remains on show at the Museum of Royal Worcester (museumofroyalworcester.org).

Hard work made this city and the Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum tells the story. It was a centre for iron making, engineering, the wool trade and was once the capital of glove making, employing 30,000 people at its peak. The late Queen Elizabeth II wore Worcester-made gloves at her coronation.

Most of these industries have disappeared, but the world-famous Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce is still made here, a 20-minute walk from where I am writing these words. The offices are now in Manchester and the ownership is with Warren Buffett and a bunch of other investors in the US.

A brown spicy sauce with a timeless taste created in Worcester that is exported across Africa. Like the city itself, once tasted never forgotten.



The King Charles Inn in Worcester. Picture: SUPPLIED

ON AFRICAN TIME

TickTok, a clock and watch repair shop, sits among the black-and-white buildings of Friar Street, the oldest street in Worcester, dating back to the 13th century.

The shop is packed to the rafters with grandfather clocks, 100-year-old timepieces and scores of watches that people bought in duty free, decades ago, and are now worth a pretty penny.

Every day, at least four new South African faces, many fresh from OR Tambo airport, find their way to TickTok.

On the other side of the counter they will be met with a warm smile and handshake, straight from Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal, from owner Peter Schonert.

Aside from his talent for fixing clocks, Schonert is a master host, networker and proud South African. When you shake his hand you feel the distance from Africa melt away.



Peter Schonert. Picture: CHRIS BISHOP

Schonert, born in Durban in 1960, took the leap from KwaZulu-Natal to Worcester in July 2019. It was in the cause of family that he came. His son Nick had signed with the Premiership Rugby side the Worcester Warriors. He signed with the Sale Sharks after the Warriors disbanded in 2023.

Schonert's other son Kurt played for London Scottish before embarking on a career as an entrepreneur, which includes a Worcester-based coffee shop and bakery called the Guilt Trip. Their sister, Gabi, an art teacher who attended St Mary's School Kloof in Durban, also joined the family in England.

It wasn't plain sailing for Schonert senior when he arrived in Worcestershire. Back in KwaZulu-Natal, he'd spent 20 years running 13 cash and carry shops called Buzi. He also manufactured veldskoene with his company Bushwackers.

Finding work around Worcester wasn't easy, as he was overqualified. He applied to be a maintenance man at St Peter's Garden Centre in Worcester, to no avail. He worked for a short time as a forklift driver in a door factory in Upton-upon-Severn.

"I started the shop because my kids and wife were telling me I was driving them mad," he says with a smile.

Schonert followed in the footsteps of the man who'd trained him, his father.

Hans Gunther Gustav Otto Karl Schonert trained as a watchmaker in post-war Germany, and arrived in South Africa in 1950 with an empty suitcase. He worked at Feldman's Jewellers in Bloemfontein, where he married the boss's daughter, before setting up his own shop in Eshowe, which operated between 1965 and 1995.

More than 40 years since Schonert learnt his trade at his father's side, he is grappling with fitting into a new country far from Africa.

"I feel like a caged lion here," he says. "I had a life of fishing, jet skis, boating and walking on the beach."

The trip that said it all happened on the River Avon after an invite from his Worcestershire neighbours to join in some "wild swimming" as they call it – in the river.

"It was a bit tame, yet they all thought it was wonderful. I simply said: 'Have you tried a category five rapid on the Zambezi? Because I have!'"