



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

While Industrial Revolution Shropshire is top of Jules' time-travel wish list, on a present-day visit to the county he's thrilled to discover more history is being made

As an historian, I'm often asked to choose my favourite era. Well, I started my career as an archaeologist, growing up in Britain's oldest recorded town: Colchester. Since being founded by the Romans, it's played an important role in our nation's development. To a young kid surrounded by its ancient fabric, it inspired a lifelong passion for the past. But if I could dial up a date on the dashboard of my time machine, I wouldn't be heading towards Roman, Saxon or medieval Britain. I'd be back in Shropshire, during the Industrial Revolution.

The reason is simple. It's not because it was glamorous or romantic – it's because it was the most exciting moment in our global story. The events and ideas it set in motion have shaped the world we now live in, yet it all began with one idea: the building of a small iron bridge across a river in a wet and windswept valley in a place we now call Ironbridge. There are precious few objects and places that can rightly claim to represent a distinct moment in time, but this small town is one of them.

I've often worked in Shropshire. It's a county that I love to recommend to buyers on *Escape to the Country*. And not just because of its beauty but also because it's never lost sight of the past. And so it was with great pleasure that whilst filming for *Escape* I had the chance to pay a long-overdue visit to the British Ironwork Centre just outside Oswestry.

For the last 10 years, it's striven towards the goal of becoming a centre of excellence for those interested in working with metal, be it iron, steel, bronze or copper, showcasing some of the country's finest craftsmanship and most talented artisans. Much of their work remains in a bid to cover its many acres with a sculpture park that in decades to come will, I'm sure, be the envy of the world. In just a handful of years, chairman Clive Knowles has translated his infectious enthusiasm and vision into a burgeoning reality.

When I caught up with Clive it was clear we both shared a passion for Shropshire's industrial pedigree, and we agreed that no ironwork centre could be better placed. Surrounded by some astonishing work, ranging from beautiful horses to gazelle, giraffe and gazebo, we marvelled at a gorilla made from 40,000 spoons donated by schools across the country, its aim to highlight the

plight of children not as fortunate as others. The finished beast was as accomplished as it was beguiling. Standing within a cage that could have come from the set of *King Kong*, this gentle giant was the work of just one man, Alfie Bradley, who welded every single spoon himself.

Just a few yards away in the main workshop, Clive and I joined Alfie to get a rare glimpse of his latest creation: an angel, over 30 feet high, that will be made entirely of 100,000 bladed weapons collected from police forces, prisons and the public. It was my great honour to weld the very first knife to the framework: a bayonet dated 1940, perfect for a man mad about military history. The knives donated thus far include a chilling selection of samurai and other swords, worryingly freely available in gift shops; bread knives and many more that have no place on our streets. The choice of a fallen and wounded angel for this project is no coincidence and, when completed by the middle of next year, it will shine a blazing light upon the abhorrent and tragic scourge of knife crime across the country.

It's hoped many others will also contribute to the sculpture, amongst them Boris Johnson and Richard Branson. The slogan is simple: 'Save a life, surrender your knife'. It represents a chance to once again encourage a nationwide amnesty on weapons. No surprise the British Ironwork Centre will distribute iron deposit boxes at selected sites around the country in which unwanted weapons can be disposed of and eventually added to Alfie's work.

When this angel is finished perhaps we might turn our remaining weapons into something else, something both beautiful and useful for the future to savour, of which our industrial and revolutionary forbears would also approve.

How about a bridge? A bridge to the past. 🗡️

• For details, visit www.surrenderyourknife.co.uk

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archaeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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