

Midlands



Birmingham's coronation as a gleaming business centre won't be complete until 2026 and the (scheduled) arrival of HS2. Hmm. Unheralded Coventry will have its day much sooner, with a stint as City of Culture in 2021. Its creative credentials are already on display at the Belgrade Theatre and the funky FarGo Village; with a convenient location in the centre of England and a planned station upgrade, it's definitely a place to watch.

This year, though, we've been most impressed by the traditional virtues of the Midlands. In uncertain times, there's something reassuring about the beauty of, and sense of history in, down-to-earth towns such as Stamford, Shrewsbury and Ledbury. Comfort, convenience and community — along with superior schools — are the bedrock of our Best Places to Live guide, and you'll find those qualities in spades, as well as plenty of heart: not just in the places we've picked, but across the region, from Belper and Bakewell to Oundle and Solihull. Ace.



AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE
£266,234

Source: Habito/TwentyCi

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WHAT'S HOT

● All points Bridgnorth. The pretty Shropshire town is to get a "world-class leisure destination", with a golf course, swimming pools, a spa and a farm shop

● Commuter says yes. Fast trains from Stafford to London (1hr 17min) are boosting Eccleshall and Abbots Bromley

● Rutland Water is the perfect central mooring for the sailing set

WHAT'S NOT

● Uproar! The shrinking catchment areas for Birmingham's King Edward VI grammar schools are bad news for tiger parents in Stoke, Derby and Leicester

● It's not just the pigs that are fleeing. A dozen shops closed in Tamworth last year

● Developers in Winterton, Lincolnshire, deserve a public pecking after they put nets on hedgerows to deter birds. Kudos to the locals for defending their nest

“ Harborne is a comfy berth for those impressed by the £12m fitness centre within Fitbit-testing distance



'Edale is a proper working village' Lauren Dempsey with her partner, Ben, and their children, Nell and Beren. Below, the pleasing 'burb of Harborne

BIRMINGHAM: HARBORNE 2

In its relentless attempt to wrest the crown of "England's second city" back from Manchester, Brum continues to solidify its far from rum reputation. And few suburbs are more solid than this pleasing 'burb a seven-minute train ride from the centre, with Victorian villas, a busy high street and decent schools. Harborne and St Mary's primaries are deemed outstanding by Ofsted; Harborne Academy is good and you're in catchment contention for the renowned King Edward VI grammars.

No one goes hungry, or thirsty, here. At the last count, B17 had more than 10 decent boozers: the Plough is a gastropub that rustles up a full English and the Junction serves a stonking Sunday lunch. For special occasions, the £60 tasting menu at the Harborne Kitchen includes mi-cuit salmon with Arenkha caviar and Himalayan-salt-aged Goosnargh duck. There are at least half a dozen coffee shops on the high street, where you'll also find Waitrose and M&S; independent stores include Hedge, an interiors retailer that holds craft workshops.

Near Queen Elizabeth Hospital and the university, as well as the botanical gardens, Harborne is a comfy berth for doctors and academics more impressed by the £12m Harborne Pool & Fitness Centre and the cricket and golf clubs within Fitbit-testing distance than by the proximity of ultra-expensive Edgbaston. The airport is less than an hour's drive away. All too tame? Head to Moseley. **Best address** Wentworth. **Why we love it** Birmingham at its bustling best. **£373,410 (£895 pcm)**