

fringe theatre at the South Street arts centre. Go for a swim at the beautifully restored Thames Lido before diving into a foodie treat at the Reading Room or the Corn Stores.

Residents were miffed when the town missed out on city status last year. Winning rivals included Wrexham, where the fortunes of the football team have been transformed by the actor Ryan Reynolds. Reading FC could use a similar sprinkling of Hollywood stardust – perhaps Shinfield Studios will provide a saviour.

Best place to live if... You want the force – and the Liz line – to be with you.

Best address Sonning or Caversham for riverside living (far) away from the centre.

£475,475*

REIGATE, SURREY

Affluent part-time commuter towns are two a penny – or £1.5 million a four-bedroom house – across the home counties, so picking one that stands out is as hard as finding a period semi whose loft has yet to be converted.

This Surrey market town in the shadow of the North Downs is continuing to attract younger relocators from London suburbs (it's about 40 minutes to London Bridge and London Victoria), while charming those who grew up in the area into staying put and starting a family. So the competition for the handful of outstanding schools is fierce, and the rising academic star of Reigate Grammar School (from £7,050 a term) is a main attraction.

There is a sense of coming home about RH2. Indeed, the new WFH scene has boosted footfall in the high street, which has escaped most but not all retail closures. The Post Office has shrunk in size and opening hours, but otherwise everything is at hand, from hardware to a Harley Street skin clinic, Wagamama to walking poles.

In a sign of the times, the former Lloyds bank is a Gail's Bakery, and the old Barclays is now a Pret. There



Home county comforts

The view from Reigate Hill.

Above: Wheathampstead high street



ESTHER FORGIE/BAFFOUR EVANS/ALAMY

WHEATHAMPSTEAD HERTFORDSHIRE

Wake up and smell lavender. If you want an outlook within ten miles of the M25, this unspoilt village offers scents of rural sensibility. From the River Lea to the walled community garden surrounding country that's several cuts away from the commuter-belt, Wheathampstead – an hour from London, quicker to Luton air – combines old-fashioned charm with a host of modern conveniences.

This was once the site of the Catuvellauni Julius Caesar defeat Cassivellaunus in 54 BC. There's more recent to admire, from a medieval Domesday Book to a listed Norman St Helens church, or the disused that has been restored by a number of volunteers.

Today Rachel Jeff, a goldsmith and silversmith who runs classes from a converted mill that fronts the River Lea, says: "I've got a dog and walk for an hour and a half crossing a road. When working I can look over the river and see kingfishers and dragonflies – it's lovely."

Wheathampstead Community Group provides company for villagers since 1966. They meet once a month in the open spaces spanned by a staffed library, and there's a community gym. Everyone gets together in July for Village Weekend, which includes the Wheathampstead's contest and awards.

The arrival of Tom Kerridge's Pub in the Park festival this summer, offering tasty treats as well as a musical line-up including Bananarama and Stereo MCs, may fray the tempers of the traditionalists, but the mini marquees (which also set up a weekend home in Bath, Dulwich, Marlow and Leamington Spa) show you the direction of affluent travel.

The Tesco Express centre covers the basics and there's a chemist, a butcher and a bake shop. Marley's and Brewit offer excellent options for white. There's a good selection of pubs too, including Reading Rooms and a pizza shop which sells pizzas.

Best place to live if... You want a village hymn and modern living.

Best address Rose Cottage like a farm track, but stunning houses or

£718,300*

Need to know

● Not everyone is thrilled by King Charles's plans for a 2,500-home, renewable energy eco-village near **Faversham**, in Kent, although it will burnish the sustainable credentials of a bike-friendly town that's already taking green travel seriously.

● **Luton** airport's new Dart shuttle takes the unwanted title, against stiff competition, of the UK's most expensive train journey. It costs £4.90 for the 1.3-mile journey to Luton Airport Parkway station – £3.70 a mile.

● Join the rainbow nation in **Brighton and Hove**, which was revealed to be the UK's gayest city in the 2021 census, with more than one in ten residents identifying as LGBTQ+. The census also showed that B&H was England's most godless city, with 55.2 per cent of people reporting having no religion.

is a bag for life's worth of boutiques (Gerrards, Quattro Rish, Mint Velvet, Oliver Bonas, Space NK, Whistles), an almost matching number of charity shops and estate agencies and a lot in between, including nail bars, a florist, a butcher and Click, a welcome and welcoming tech-repair shop.

The food scene is global. Choose from Lebanese, Korean, Italian (Monte Forte Neapolitan pizza has upped the offering) and Thai via Argentina and India. Or keep it simple with a burger from Bill's or Côte.

The Everyman cinema provides welcome culture, as does the busy bijou Waterstones and an Oxfam bookshop. There are new art gallery openings, most notably Adam's Gallery, and art-K offers tutored art classes for kids of all ages.

To get you into shape for athleisure shopping in Sweaty Betty there are a few gyms on the high street, as well as a selection of health food stores and refill larders. Green space? It's reasonably leafy. Priory Park has 65 well-used

sloping acres and woodland, including tennis courts, football pitches, multisport courts, a skatepark, playground and Parkrun. There are more cricket and tennis clubs in walking distance of the centre.

Reigate Heath offers nine holes of golf (membership from £1,062 a year) as well as a pretty setting for a bracing stroll. For longer walking and cycling routes, head for the North Downs, a scenic 30-minute drive away.

The arrival of Tom Kerridge's Pub in the Park festival this summer, offering tasty treats as well as a musical line-up including Bananarama and Stereo MCs, may fray the tempers of the traditionalists, but the mini marquees (which also set up a weekend home in Bath, Dulwich, Marlow and Leamington Spa) show you the direction of affluent travel.

Best place to live if... You want to gain a better work/life balance – and get a dog.

Best address Detached homes on High Trees and Pilgrims' Way.

£672,000*