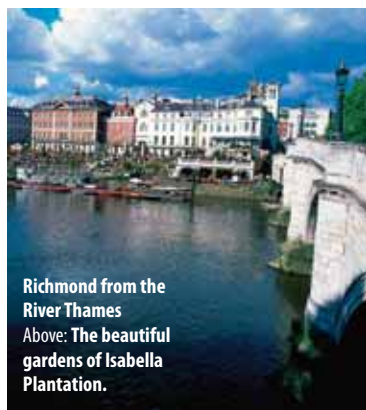




Years of urban development has seen lots of villages merge into Greater London. **Village View** explores these lesser known enclaves.

Oasis of charm

Alice Bianchi-Clark, pictured above, journeys to quaint Richmond to indulge in the capital's countryside.



Richmond from the River Thames
Above: The beautiful gardens of Isabella Plantation.

I am less than 45 minutes from the hustle and bustle of central London and yet the Richmond Hill landscape before me looks like an 18th century landscape painting. Immortalised by artists such as Turner and Reynolds, the view from Richmond Hill is so evocative, it's the only one in the UK protected by an Act of Parliament.

With 2,500 acres of hills, woodland and grassland, Richmond Park, is a walker's dream. A former hunting ground of King Henry VIII, the park is still home to red and fallow deer. I spot a herd resting under the shade of an oak tree, their antlers rising like fanned coral.

From King Henry's Mound the distant view of St Paul's Cathedral is breathtaking as are the gardens of Pembroke Lodge – the classical arches of its 18th century architecture rising above dancing cherry blossoms. Next I explore the park's woodland garden, Isabella Plantation, a riot of trumpeting azaleas, poised camellias, cup-like magnolias and a fusion of floral scents. I make my way along the side of its gurgling stream led by a whirring dragonfly.

Further down the hill, Richmond village is huddled with quaint art galleries, wine-merchants, tailors, antique shops and jewellery stores but the pungent aromas drifting from Teddington Cheese are the big draw. I stock up on blue cheeses, chutney and oatcakes.

On Brewers Lane, one of the village's narrow cobbled streets I succumb to a scrumptious ice-cream at Sicilian-owned Gelateria Danieli. Tit for Tat in Paved Court is a gem of a milliners with quirky plumed hats in vibrant hues. A few doors away is the enchanting Lion & Unicorn bookshop which hosts children's readings in the attic.

in checkered tablecloths. Further along, is Richmond Pier with regular boat services to Hampton Court, once home to King Henry VIII. A tour of the state apartments, gardens and the incredible maze is a must.

However the jewel in Richmond's crown is Palladian-style Marble Hill House in 66 acres of parkland. Built in the 18th century for Henrietta Howard, mistress of King George II, it was here that the poets of the day were entertained. The playful exuberance of its interiors sum up Richmond for me - a place of intense history, beauty and sweeping country homes. **E**



The cobbled street of Paved Court; deer in Richmond Park; the Palladian Marble Hill House

The lawns of Richmond Green are surrounded by Georgian buildings and the turreted remains of Henry VII's Tudor Palace of Richmond. I follow the towpath past cottages draped in flowers to The White Swan, a riverside institution with a popular beer garden, serving hearty British pub food.

Here the River Thames comes into view with its islands of weeping willow trees encircled by white houseboats. I chance upon a boatyard renting pea-green rowing boats by the hour, with pretty names such as Madeline, Victoria and May that make me long to hire one.

Next door is Tide Tables, a café under a brick tunnel with wooden-tables draped

DON'T MISS

The Great River Race runs from Docklands to Ham House at 11am on September 5. It includes 300 crews from across the world. greatriverace.co.uk

MORE INFORMATION

Boat services from Richmond Pier to Hampton Court cost £7.50 per person.

Boat hire is available from £2.50 per person per hour from richmondbridgeboathouses.com

Fancy staying in the area? The Petersham Hotel's woodland view rooms start at £170 a night. Its fine dining attracts the likes of Mick Jagger but you can have afternoon tea from £16.50. petershamhotel.co.uk

The boutique riverside Bingham Hotel hosts live jazz on Thursdays and open-air yoga on Mondays. Double rooms start from £160 per night. thebingham.co.uk