



# The best of times, the worst of times

There's no getting away from it: the Cotswolds is a beautiful part of the world to live in; the flip side, says GRCC's Barbara Piranty, is that it's also one of the hardest places if you're poor

WORDS: Katie Jarvis ♦ PHOTOS: Andrew Higgins/TWM

**G**loucestershire is an idyllic county, characterised by golden stone, sweeping views, picturesque villages and delicious farm produce. It's also, says Barbara Piranty, one of the worst counties to grow up in if you're poor.

Barbara leads GRCC (Gloucestershire Rural Community Council), a charity that has been working to improve outcomes for Gloucestershire communities throughout the past 100 years.

'This year, we'll be working with our cross-sector colleagues on a number of issues, including the ongoing impact of the pandemic and climate change,' Barbara says. 'But a particular focus will be the housing crisis: soaring prices and hikes in rents, which are driving out young people who've grown up here, and key workers who keep the region going.'

Barbara's career to date includes extensive work on rural isolation in Gloucestershire, as well as nationally in digital mental health.

**Where do you live and why?**

On the outskirts of Cheltenham – the best of both worlds! I'm within minutes of beautiful Gloucestershire countryside but close enough to the buzz of the town I love: the cultural centre of the Cotswolds and the festival town I grew up in. I've always wanted to live in the countryside but I would struggle with the isolation. The pandemic has allowed us to properly open up about the taboo subject of mental health. It's okay to not be okay.

**How long have you lived in the Cotswolds?**

I was born in Quenington, a wonderful nucleated village near Fairford. When I was two – the youngest of five children – we moved to Cheltenham. I can see from old family photographs how idyllic Quenington was: freedom to play in the woods and fields, or swim in the River Coln during those long hot summers.

**ABOVE:** Barbara Piranty, chief executive of GRCC, at Crickley Hill Nature Reserve

**RIGHT:** Batsford Arboretum – where Barbara loves an afternoon stroll



The Eight Bells, Chipping Campden

**What's your idea of a perfect weekend in the Cotswolds?**

A trip to Huffkins in Stow for a breakfast bap and Earl Grey, followed by an afternoon stroll around Batsford Arboretum. Then dinner and an overnight stay at the Lygon Arms, or Abbots Grange, in Broadway.

**If money were no object, where would you live in the Cotswolds?**

It depends on the house. I adore 17th-century properties with beams and inglenook fireplaces. Mine would need an orchard, vegetable garden, plenty of

flowers, bees, stunning views and an indoor/outdoor pool because the UK weather is so unpredictable! ...A couple of tennis courts and a gym would be useful, too.

**Where are you least likely to live in the Cotswolds?**

Anywhere too touristy. I avoid crowds at all costs.

**Where's the best pub in the area?**

Top three at this moment would be: the Eight Bells in Chipping Campden; the wonderfully understated Rose & Crown at Shilton, near Burford; and (an all-time favourite) the Falkland Arms at Great Tew. I'm a real sucker for a roaring fire and a glass of mulled wine.

**And the best place to eat?**

Two polar opposites. The Daffodil in Cheltenham: the Hollywood glamour of Art Deco features, delicious food and wonderful service. And the Rose & Crown at Shilton for the relaxed homely atmosphere, warm welcome, and high quality food created by chef and landlord Martin Coldicott and head chef Mike Evans. My mum loved to feed people, and I miss her no-nonsense approach to cooking as well as her amazing food. She has Alzheimer's so we don't get to do that anymore.



Photo: Getty Images/Stockphoto



**What’s the best thing about the Cotswolds?**

The Cotswold stone, the arboreta, the lavender, the craziness of Robert Dover’s Olimpick Games, football in the river at Bourton, woolsack races in Tetbury, Bibury duck races. All make the Cotswolds great and very British.

**... and the worst?**

It’s one of the worst places to grow up if you are poor, with young people feeling isolated and unable to stay in their villages because of soaring house prices. Our job at GRCC is to act as independent facilitator of affordable rural housing, by identifying local need through Housing Needs Surveys; then helping identify small parcels of land on which to build affordable homes. We need to stabilise rural communities more than ever. There are many misconceptions around affordable housing, but it is essentially for local people who already live, work in or have an historic connection to a parish.

**Which shop could you not live without?**

Farm shops. I’ve been known to travel considerable distances when I hear about a good one! We have recently completed a survey sent to communities for Gloucestershire Food Revolution project, to find out what the barriers are to accessing good quality local food. The project will work to help reduce or remove these barriers, including working closely with the farming community.

**What’s the most underrated thing about the Cotswolds?**

The views. I never tire of them.

**What is a person from the Cotswolds called?**

Sometimes ‘wealthy’; often ‘struggling’.

**What’s your favourite view in the Cotswolds?**

Crickley Hill Country Park, just outside Cheltenham, with its panoramic views of

**ABOVE:** Barbara Piranty, chief executive of GRCC, believes we need to stabilise rural communities more than ever

Gloucestershire, the Malverns, May Hill and beyond. I’ve spent many happy hours with the special people in my life, walking hills and woods, chatting to the Belted Galloways whom we affectionately call the Oreo cows! I’ve also had many soul-searching, life-changing conversations there: a great neutral space to talk openly.

**What’s your quintessential Cotswolds village and why?**

Lower Slaughter, completely frozen in time; a stone’s throw from busy Bourton-on-the Water, but a world away at the same time. Walk along the River Eye, sit on the bank, and dangle your feet into the water while eating a delicious ice cream from the Old Mill museum and tearoom.

**Name three basic elements of the Cotswolds...**

It’s an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; has one of the most famous stone circles in England, the Rollrights; and ▶

how can we ignore the distinctive and instantly recognisable Cotswold limestone?

**What's your favourite Cotswolds building?**

Arlington Row in Bibury or Kelmscott Manor near Lechlade. An occupant of Arlington Row once told me that they were moving furniture out of the property when a group of Japanese tourists wandered in. They thought it was a museum!

*'We need to create thriving communities where local people of all ages can afford to live and work'*

**Starter homes or executive properties?**

We have enough executive properties. Young people are finding it incredibly hard to get on the property ladder and rents are ridiculously high. In rural areas, we need to create thriving communities where local people of all ages can afford to live and work, with good access to locally sourced food and transport. At GRCC, we have been helping communities to help themselves for almost 100 years, and now it seems more important than ever.

**What are the four corners of the Cotswolds?**

It stretches across five counties: from Stratford down to Bath, and from Gloucester across to Oxfordshire.

**If you lived abroad, what would you take to remind you of the Cotswolds?**

A piece of Cotswold stone, a cream tea, and a picture of my beloved Sudeley Castle: one of the most uplifting, beautiful places I have ever visited, and the only castle in England to have a queen buried in the grounds.



Photo: salorq.uk

**What's the first piece of advice you'd give to somebody new to the Cotswolds?**

Don't take advice. Explore and make your own mind up.

**And which book should they read?**

*Cider with Rosie*, by Laurie Lee. You can visit the church in Slad, where he is buried; sit in his chair at the wonderful Woolpack Inn; and take a stunning circular walk around the valley on the Laurie Lee Wildlife Way.

**Have you a favourite Cotswolds walk?**

Studies have shown the Japanese practice of Forest Bathing, or *Shinrin-Yoku*, is good for physical and mental wellbeing, lowering heart rate and blood pressure, boosting the immune system, and accelerating recovery from illness. Walking in Westonbirt Arboretum makes me so much calmer.

**Which event, or activity, best sums up the Cotswolds?**

Festivals, from Gold Cup to Literature (my personal highlight), Science, Jazz, Folk, Music and Cricket. They boost our economy and make Cheltenham vibrant.

**ABOVE:**  
Kelmscott Manor – Barbara's favourite Cotswold building

**If you were invisible for a day, what would you do?**

I'd travel back to the English Civil War, a period that fascinates me. We know that areas in the Cotswolds were hugely significant; recent discoveries from the Porch House in Stow include a Royalist Commander's letter, and a tunnel leading from the bar to the church across the street.

**To whom or what should there be a Cotswolds memorial?**

To the amazing Joy Lofthouse, who was working at Lloyds Bank, Cirencester, when World War II broke out. Aged 20, she joined the Air Transport Auxiliary and flew military aircraft around the country – including the Spitfire. After the war, there were few jobs for female pilots so she became a special needs teacher. We need to celebrate trailblazer women.

**With whom would you most like to have a cider?**

Sir Ranulph Fiennes, the world's greatest living explorer. I was lucky enough to hear him speak at Cheltenham Literature Festival and was spellbound by his wit and tales of adventure and endurance. ♦  
**For more on GRCC, visit [grcc.org.uk](http://grcc.org.uk)**