

ANNA BRANTHWAITE



Farmer William Alexander amid his fields of lavender at Shoreham, Kent

FOCUS

Graceful ascent of lavender

KENT, the garden of England, famous for its hop fields and orchards, is now cultivating a new plant — lavender, which is in increasing demand for beauty products and home decoration. One of the best ways of enjoying the purple fields is to follow the Darent Valley path that runs past Lullingstone Castle and Roman villa, through the pretty villages of Eynsford and Shoreham to Sevenoaks, where the Hop Shop sells lavender-based products.

Hidden in rolling countryside to the east, in the hamlet of Hamptons near Hadlow, is Downderry Nursery, home to the national collection of lavender with 150 varieties. Kent Tourism lists B&Bs in the area including Leavers Oast, a converted oast house near Hadlow, where a night's stay costs from £29.

Rural Retreats has properties in the area, including Oast House near Shoreham, which sleeps two, has a pool and tennis court and is available between August 18 and September 3, for £604 for a week and £320 for three nights.

Eastwell Manor, a Pride of Britain hotel, with a leisure spa near Canterbury, offers B&B from £85 a night and has a suite for two, called Lavender Cottage, costing £280 a night.

■ Leavers Oast: 01732 850924; Kent Tourism: 0906 2941191; Rural Retreats: 01386 701177; Pride of Britain: 0870 6093012