

ELLIE SEYMOUR



# SECRET BRIGHTON



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SECRET  
**BRIGHTON**

*Ellie Seymour*

**PHOTOGRAPHS**

*Emma Croman, Lyndsey Haskell and Lucy Sharpe*



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travel guides

**E**llie Seymour is a journalist who has lived in Brighton for 15 years. She writes about the city's curiosities and hidden places on her blog Ellie & Co., Inc, which she started as a way to rediscover Brighton away from the tourist crowds. She cannot walk past an intriguing alleyway or courtyard without seeing what's on the other side – and is always looking for the next adventure or hidden place to write about.

**W**e have taken great pleasure in drawing up *Secret Brighton* and hope that through its guidance you will, like us, continue to discover unusual, hidden or little-known aspects of the city. Some entries are accompanied by historical asides or anecdotes as an aid to understanding the city in all its complexity.

*Secret Brighton* also draws attention to the multitude of details found in places that we may pass every day without noticing. We invite you to look more closely at the urban landscape and to see your own city with the curiosity and attention that we often display while travelling elsewhere ...

Comments on this guidebook and its contents, as well as information on places we may not have mentioned, are more than welcome and will enrich future editions.

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## THE SKY LOUNGE

③

### *Reminiscent of an old ocean liner*

*Embassy Court, King's Road, Brighton BN1*

*Open during the Brighton Festival in May, Heritage Open Days weekends in September and for private tours*

*[www.embassycourt.org.uk/contact-us/](http://www.embassycourt.org.uk/contact-us/)*



**K**nown as the “Sky Lounge”, the incredible balcony on the 11th floor of the Grade II-listed Embassy Court arguably offers one of the most enviable views over Brighton and Hove seafront.

Today, it’s mainly a communal space for residents and also the final destination on a tour of this fascinating iconic seafront landmark, which lay rotting after years of neglect until it was restored in 2005.

Embassy Court was designed in 1935 by expat Canadian architect Wells Coates as an architectural experiment in modernism and was aimed at an upmarket clientele. In the brief pre-war era when it operated, it was one of the most prestigious apartment buildings in the UK. Its occupants are said to have included Laurence Olivier, Rex Harrison and Graham Greene, who shot to fame with his novel about the area, Brighton Rock.

The 72 flats were initially only available to rent. Prices ranged from £155 a year for a one-bedroom flat with a reception room, bathroom, toilet and small kitchen, up to £500 a year for a three-bedroom flat with two receptions, two bathrooms, two toilets and a kitchen – a year’s rent would have bought a whole house in Brighton at the time.

The tour takes you all around the building, starting in the lobby, which has interesting features such as an old telephone booth and the entrance to the former on-site bank. It includes a trip in a tiny old passenger lift – in 1936, the building had a staff of 35, including one full-time senior caretaker, two other caretakers, as well as cooks and cleaners, so occupants would not have carried their own shopping or luggage upstairs!

The tour also takes in an apartment for a look at some classic Wells Coates detailing, including curved doors and door handles. Note the tiny kitchens, as residents would mainly have eaten out, or in the former ground-floor restaurant.

The Sky Lounge is accessed through the “tank room”, which once housed a giant boiler for the centralised heating system. It is now a communal space for residents and has a small museum of artefacts relating to the building’s heritage, including a 1930s TV unearthed recently in one of the apartments.

A blue plaque outside Embassy Court, and a small exhibition in the lobby, pay tribute to Brighton-born Edward Zeff. This Jewish undercover Allied spy survived torture at the hands of the Nazis and moved into Embassy Court after the war.

## CONSTABLE'S FORMER HOME ②

### *A romantic great's seaside escape*

11 Sillwood Road, Brighton BN1 2LF  
Can be viewed from the outside only



One of the world's greatest painters, John Constable, lived in Brighton from 1824 to 1828, although it wasn't until recently that historians have managed to work out exactly where he and his family made their home.

Thanks to detailed, painstaking research by the Regency Society, the house has now been identified as 11 Sillwood Road. Although the outside has been altered, essentially the house is still the same inside as it was when the Constables lived in it. Today, it can be easily identified by a round blue plaque outside, marking the spot.

Constable decided to move to Brighton from London in the hope it would ease the symptoms of his wife's TB. During the four years they lived here, he created over 150 works of art, most of them inspired by the town, which was hailed by their guests – according to his wife, Maria – as “Hampstead with the addition of the sea”. The painter is known to have enjoyed long, systematic walks in the surrounding area, which inspired many other works.

The key pieces of evidence used to track down Constable's former home were mostly found in letters between him and his good friend, Archdeacon Fisher, who lived in London. These revealed an address at 9 Mrs Sober's Gardens, and made reference to a neighbour called Mr Masquerier. He was a well-known portrait painter of the period, who bought 10 Sillwood Road from Mrs Sober in March 1824.

This information eventually led researchers to discover that Sober's Gardens was at one point renamed Sillwood Road. This turned out to be the place from which Constable wrote to Fisher, “I am looking for a month's quiet here and I have brought with me several works to complete. What a blessing it is thus to be able to carry one's profession with me.”



### *Constable's Brighton walks: following in the great artist's footsteps*

It's surprising how few people know that the great painter John Constable once lived in Brighton, let alone that he produced over 150 works while he was here.

In 2017, a critically acclaimed Brighton Museum exhibition, *Constable and Brighton*, saw 60 of the artist's sketches, drawings and paintings relating to his time in the city brought together for the first time. To coincide with the exhibition, the museum launched two circular Constable-themed walks around the city and surrounds, called *In Constable's Footsteps*.

The walks focus on the period that the artist lived in Brighton for his wife's health (between 1824 and 1828) and explore some of the places that inspired his paintings, including buildings he would have known.

The first walk is a 4-mile (6.4-km) city sightseeing tour, which begins at Brighton Museum in the Pavilion Gardens and takes between two and three hours. Sights include Constable's former home at 11 Sillwood Road (see p. 50); the school his children attended, run by his friend Henry Phillips; Little Preston Street, now believed to be the location of Constable's painting, *Houses at Hampstead*; St Ann's Well – Constable made many paintings from this viewpoint; Hove beach – the view west towards Shoreham was one of his favourite subjects; and the site of the Royal Suspension Chain Pier (see p. 32), the subject of one of the largest works to come out of Constable's time in Brighton.

The second walk, again starting outside Brighton Museum, explores places further out of the city centre that inspired Constable's work, such as West Blatchington Windmill (see p. 216); St Andrew's Church – restored since Constable sketched its ruins; Shoreham Beach; and Preston Park's elm trees (see p. 244). There's also the option to take a bus up to Devil's Dyke, one of the artist's favourite countryside spots, to witness the settings for more of his paintings, including those depicting the views over Shoreham.

Both walks are designed to be undertaken in your own time. Free guide leaflets are available from Brighton Museum and the Royal Pavilion, as well as Hove Museum (see p. 108), the Booth Museum of Natural History (see p. 246) and Preston Manor (see p. 230). They can also be downloaded from [www.brightonmuseums.org.uk/constablewalks](http://www.brightonmuseums.org.uk/constablewalks)

## ANNA'S MUSEUM

③

### *Taxidermy in a shop window*

44 Upper North Street, Brighton BN1 3FH

[www.annasmuseum.org](http://www.annasmuseum.org)

*Can be viewed from the outside only*



Anna's Museum isn't a museum in the traditional sense – it's an old Brighton shop window filled with curious pieces of natural history, geology and taxidermy. You can stop and look from the outside on an amble along the attractive Upper North Street.

The place belongs to young Brighton resident and natural history collector Anna Rubinstein, known around town as the city's youngest taxidermist. She started collecting things around age four, with her interest in taxidermy and natural history following a few years later.

By her teens, she had built up quite an array of natural history artefacts, which she displays as Anna's Museum. Everything is neatly presented in little wooden boxes and glass jars, all hand-labelled so you know what you're looking at.

Anna's fascinating collection grows and changes over time and includes things that animals leave behind, like antlers and teeth, wasps' nests and shed skin. There are also bits of bone and a few skulls, as well as pieces from far-away places – shells, fossils and rocks from the French-Italian border, precious stones, an earring from a tribe in Borneo and an arrangement of stone eggs.

At the time of writing, there was also a taxidermy frog, a large beetle, a fox skin made from a dead animal that Anna found in the road, a curious stuffed squirrel in a bell jar holding an egg and wearing a waistcoat, a beautiful pheasant and a flying seagull, its wings outstretched, which Anna created during a workshop run by ethical taxidermist, Jazmine Miles-Long ([www.jazminemileslong.com](http://www.jazminemileslong.com)).

Such is the museum's appeal among fellow collectors and Brighton and Hove locals that Anna frequently receives regular donations. She always adds them to her display of treasures alongside handwritten letters from the donors.



Walk a little further west along Upper North Street, turn right just past The Windmill pub into Clifton Place and you'll discover the Clifton conservation area, home to some of the city's finest Regency and Victorian architecture.

## FRENCH PROTESTANT CHURCH ⑤

### *An architectural treasure*

1A Queensbury Mews, Brighton BN1 2FE  
Can be viewed from the outside only



In Brighton's Victorian seaside heyday, the town attracted a large crowd of overseas visitors, particularly from France, who helped to fill the pews in Brighton churches.

To ensure that these French visitors had a place to worship in their own language, Brighton resident Mrs E Hayes opened up her own house at 20 Montpelier Villas for such services, and made sure that a French-speaking vicar was available to preach.

Soon the congregation outgrew her home. Eventually, after many moves from one church to another, Mrs Hayes arranged for one to be built on a piece of land just off Regency Square, behind a row of houses that stretched from 121 King's Road to the corner of Regency Square.

On 27 February 1888, the French Protestant church was complete and consecrated for use in services (including a weekly Sunday service), marriages, funerals and christenings, which it celebrated for 120 years. By 2008, the congregation was dwindling, however, so the church committee decided to sell up and the building was finally deconsecrated.

Today, it's been converted into a charming private home. Unfortunately, the first owners stripped the property of the Victorian interior. Then two sensitive developers stepped in, taking far greater care to preserve this architectural gem, and going so far as to track down some of the missing fixtures and fittings, as much for the benefit of passers-by as for their own enjoyment.

The interior of the former church has been carefully turned into a delightful split-level home, which apparently has a stereo system tucked into the pulpit perched over an ornate porch entrance in the bedroom. It's also believed that the foundation stone has been turned and re-engraved with the original inscription.

### NEARBY

#### *The Queensbury Arms*

Just opposite the church you'll notice a tiny pub on the corner. This gem of a drinking establishment was once known as the Hole in the Wall and claims to be Brighton's smallest pub.

#### *Hidden history*

It is said that a time capsule containing a newspaper, a bronze medal and a number of coins marking Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee is concealed within the church's central foundation stone.

## SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND ART TERRACOTTA FRIEZES

(27)

### *Hidden remnants of Brighton's original art school*

University of Brighton Faculty of Arts, 58–67 Grand Parade, Brighton BN2 0JY

Tel: 01273 643217

[www.arts.brighton.ac.uk](http://www.arts.brighton.ac.uk)

Open during term time 9am–7pm; holidays 9am–6pm

Closed between Christmas and New Year

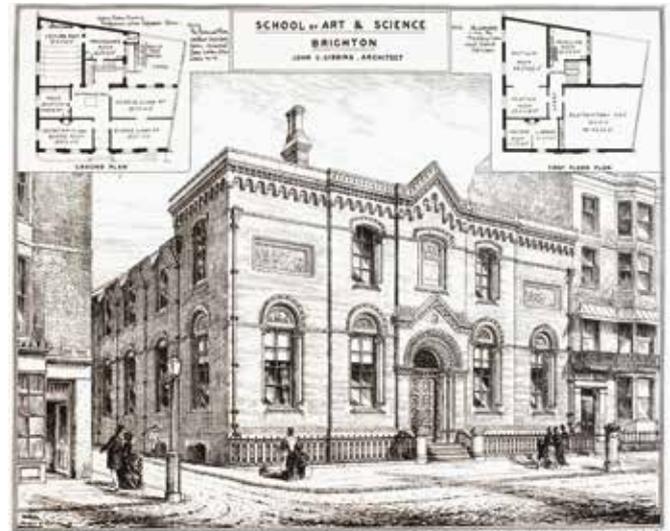


**B**efore the University of Brighton Faculty of Arts moved into its glassy modern Grand Parade premises, it occupied a beautiful terracotta building, remnants of which can be found in the foyer of its new home.

Enter through the main door: to the left of the reception on the wall above, and opposite the door to some stairs, you'll see two large relief sculptures, as well as four smaller ones on two pillars. Although these might look like works of art in their own right, they're actually panels from the main façade of the original 1877 building. They were designed by Alexander Fisher and manufactured by Messrs Johnson in Ditchling.

The new Brighton School of Science and Art was a grand Romanesque-style building with polished red granite columns flanking the main entrance, Bath stone coping and cornices, and a brick façade enriched by the series of terracotta panels and lunettes that can be seen today in the lobby.

The scenes on the two bigger panels were designed to symbolically represent the kind of activities that would take place at this new school. An article in the *Brighton Herald* dated 3 February 1877 describes them nicely: "... pottery is represented by a boy carrying an earthen vessel; architecture, by another constructing a toy-house; sculpture, by a sculptor at work on a bust; geometry, by a fourth figure examining a scroll; building construction, by a youth with a saw and a plank; painting, by an artist at his easel, and so on. It says much for the artistic genius of Mr Alexander Fisher, the head master, who furnished designs for the decorations, that appropriate emblems have been given to each of the various figures."



# UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON DESIGN ARCHIVES

28

## *Underground collections*

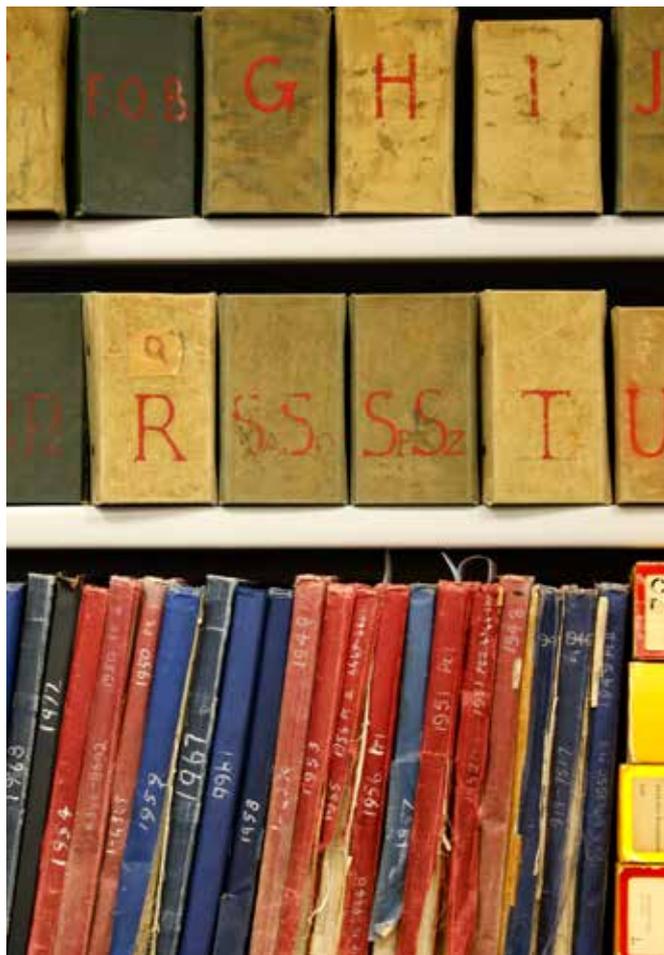
University of Brighton Faculty of Arts, 58–67 Grand Parade, Brighton BN2 0JY

Tel: 01273 643217

[www.arts.brighton.ac.uk/collections/design-archives](http://www.arts.brighton.ac.uk/collections/design-archives)

Open by appointment only

Admission free



Hidden underneath Brighton University's main building on Grand Parade, in what was once the Basement Club, is an extensive collection of 20 design archives that constitute an internationally significant research base for scholars and students. Two of the archives relate directly to the history of Brighton itself.

The first is the Brighton School of Art Archive, which tells the story of this remarkable artistic institution which was – believe it or not – established at first above the kitchen of the Royal Pavilion in January 1859, moving to its own building on Grand Parade in 1877. When it eventually outgrew this building, it was forced to move into larger, more modern premises on the same site in 1961. The archive comprises photographs, curricula and other records that document the activities of staff and students throughout the school's long history.

The second, the Vokins Archive, tells the story of Brighton's longest-standing, although somewhat lesser-known, department store called Vokins. It was the mainstay of the Brighton retail scene for over 100 years until it closed in 1997.

The archive is a nostalgic treasure trove of records, including beautiful old photographs, carrier bags, documents, press cuttings, ledgers, plans, and correspondence relating to staff, sales, stock, store development and promotion.



### *Terracotta friezes*

Before the University of Brighton Faculty of Arts moved into its glassy modern Grand Parade premises, it occupied a beautiful terracotta building, remnants of which can be found in the foyer of its new home (see p. 100).

# ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

12

## *Home to a celestial surprise*

Waterloo Street, Hove BN3 1AQ

[www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk)

Open daily. For access, visitors must ask for the key at *The Southern Belle pub* (tel: 01273 734806) opposite. The church is also occasionally open to the public as a music venue.



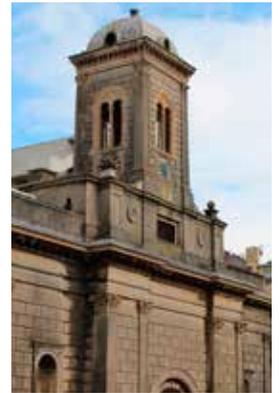
In the early 1820s, the Prince Regent made the old fishing towns of Brighton and Hove fashionable places to be seen in. During this time, the Grade 1-listed St Andrew's Church – now closed for worship and only open on occasion to the public as a music venue – was built to serve the wealthy residents of the new Brunswick Estate and became one of the area's most fashionable places of worship.

Set back from the seafront, the Italian Renaissance-style symmetry and grandeur of this 1827 church (designed by the famous architect Sir Charles Barry) perfectly match the neighbouring squares and terraces.

The inside is just as pretty, with light streaming in through skylights and stained-glass windows, albeit a little altered since the church was built. The baldacchinos over the altar were added in 1925 by an architect called Randoll Blacking, along with a font to fulfil the parish priest's desire that St Andrew's should become "a little bit of Italy in Waterloo Street".

One of its most beautiful features is perhaps the painted ceiling, which features the sun surrounded by a crescent moon, a comet, Saturn and stars. A series of 19th-century monuments provides an introduction to the great and the good who worshipped here in the church's heyday.

As well as being a fashionable church, St Andrew's was a popular final resting place for members of Hove society, in an underground crypt. The crypt was closed for burials in 1854, by which time only 55 people had been buried there. Although access isn't possible today, it's said to house five segmented barrel vaults containing several rows of iron shelves on which hundreds of coffins could be placed.



### *Charles Barry plaque*

Outside the church is a blue plaque commemorating the genius Victorian architect, Sir Charles Barry. He is said to have learned his craft in Brighton on much-loved buildings including St Andrew's Church as well as the Royal Sussex County Hospital and "the Pepperpot" (see p. 140) before going on to rebuild London's Palace of Westminster in the mid-19th century and design the Houses of Parliament. It's alleged he's buried here in the crypt.

## FEIBUSCH NATIVITY MURAL

④

### *A heavenly resurrection*

St Wilfrid's Flats, Whippingham Road, Brighton BN2 3PZ

Can be viewed during Heritage Open Days weekends. For more information, visit [www.rth.org.uk](http://www.rth.org.uk)

Admission free



In the former Lady Chapel of St Wilfrid's Church is a long-forgotten religious mural of the nativity, which was recently unearthed after 37 years. It was painted in 1939 by Hans Feibusch, a prolific modernist German-Jewish artist who fled to England from the Nazis.

When builders began converting St Wilfrid's into social housing in 2015, they discovered a heavenly sight: this huge mural measuring over 46 square metres and covering three walls of the original Lady Chapel on the ground floor.

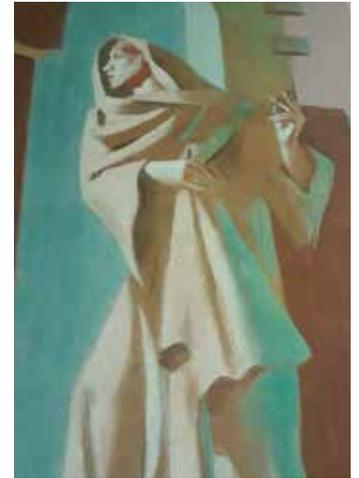
The artwork was in poor condition when it was found by the Hyde Group housing association, with extensive water damage to the paintwork and plaster, caused partly by a leak in one of the walls. However, a successful crowd-funding campaign raised £28,000 to pay for the restoration work.

The restored mural was formally unveiled by author Alison MacLeod, whose novel *Unexploded* was inspired by Feibusch's life and is set around this area in Brighton. It's based around a character called Otto, who is commissioned by the real-life Bishop George Bell of Chichester to create a mural for St Wilfrid's.

Feibusch was born in Frankfurt in 1898, and after his studies became an active member of several prominent artists' societies in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1930 he was awarded the German Grand State Prize for Painters by the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin, but with the rise to power of the Nazis, his work was outlawed.

When he arrived in Britain, Feibusch designed posters and book jackets for Shell and the London Underground. Bishop Bell spotted his work and wrote to ask if he would paint a mural for St Wilfrid's.

Feibusch went on to become widely known as a church muralist and sculptor. He died in 1998 shortly before his 100th birthday.



St Wilfrid's Church itself is unique in that the style is said to show influences of the Scottish architects Richard Norman Shaw and Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

## BRIGHTON TOY AND MODEL MUSEUM

⑥

*An overlooked collection of toys*

52–55 Trafalgar Street, Brighton BN1 4EB

Tel: 01273 749494

[www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk](http://www.brightontoymuseum.co.uk)

Open: Tues–Fri 10am–5pm, Sat 11am–5pm



Brighton is home to one of the world's finest collections of toys and models produced in the UK and Europe up until the mid-20th century, although most people don't know this.

The Brighton Toy and Model Museum, whose collection includes an extensive selection of trains, is fittingly housed inside four of the early Victorian arches underneath Brighton station, where it's been since 1991. Today, the 370sqm space is crammed with around 15,000 toys and models, packed into cabinets, which you browse to the sound of nostalgic jazz playing quietly in the background.

There are classic railway collections from Bing, Marklin and Bassett Lowke, soft toys, a huge selection of Meccano and other construction toys, thousands of Dinky, Matchbox and Corgi cars, not to mention puppets, dioramas, radio-controlled aircraft and old vintage arcade games.

This extraordinary collection was amassed by Chris Littledale, a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of toys. His interest was sparked by his father, a skilled model maker, and his mother, an avid collector of antiques. By the time he went to school, Chris had started gathering and restoring toys, and quickly amassed a grand and unique collection. Keen to share his love of toys with a wider audience, he founded the museum in 1990 together with a small group of friends, fellow collectors and model makers.

The museum's most treasured pieces are perhaps the two detailed working model railway layouts. One spans the back of the museum and showcases a detailed model of the Sussex countryside. The other forms the centrepiece of the museum, showing the layout of a typical British city in the 1930s, complete with original models, and three rails on which 50 trains (also dating back to the 1930s) run. Due to their age and value, the two model railway layouts are only fully operational twice a year (dates vary, so check the museum website for details).



### *A train-themed mural*

On the museum's exterior wall, under the railway arches on Trafalgar Street, is a mural harking back to the days of steam. The mural was designed by the museum's founder, Chris Littledale, and was painted by local Brighton signwriter, Terry Smith.

## DOROTHY STRINGER SCHOOL BUTTERFLY HAVEN

③

### *A giant hidden butterfly hotel*

*Dorothy Stringer School, Stringer Way, Brighton BN1 6QG*

*Access is by public footpath through the school grounds: open daily  
Admission free*



Populations of urban butterflies are in dramatic decline for various reasons. However, Brighton and Hove is one UK city that has been particularly successful in luring them back by establishing what are known as “butterfly havens” – chalky beds of wildflowers – hidden in various parks and green spaces around the city.

These havens are the unique design of Brighton resident, teacher and multi-award-winning bioeducationalist Dr Dan Danahar – known affectionately around town as “the Butterfly Man”. He created the first haven in 2007 in the grounds of Dorothy Stringer High School (where he teaches) by exposing the chalk beneath the playing fields and getting pupils to plant 40,000 wild flowers. Everyone is welcome to visit it.

“The idea behind the havens is to maintain high biodiversity and create a microclimate that supports various species – a surrogate habitat, if you like, which we’ve done by manipulating the microclimate using the typography,” says Dan.

Half the size of a football pitch, the Dorothy Stringer butterfly haven has hosted 29 different butterflies (out of a total of 59 known species in the UK) since it was created. It has even attracted Britain’s tiniest butterfly, the small blue, which is rare and previously thought not particularly adept at navigating cities. “We’ve got unbelievable numbers of common butterflies such as the common blue and small blue all over the site now,” adds Dan.

His award-winning design is based on years of research (including a doctorate) on bioengineering and microclimates. This has since been rolled out in 25 parks and green spaces around the city in collaboration with Brighton & Hove City Council.

“It doesn’t cost a council much to create these havens,” says Dan. “All they need is someone with a bulldozer to scrape the turf off the chalk before some local wild flower plugs are put in, which kids love doing, turning it into a whole community-wide engagement.”

### *Other butterfly sanctuaries around Brighton*

The largest butterfly haven in Brighton and Hove is located in East Brighton Park, where volunteers helped plant 10,000 wild flowers in 2014. Other locations include Woodingdean Park, Hove Park, Hollingbury Park and Brighthelm Gardens, to name but a few, with others in the pipeline.