

From DAILY TELEGRAPH

Subject: People living in the borough of Waverley, which is centred around Godalming, enjoy the best overall quality of life in the country!

By **John Bingham**, Social Affairs Editor

Comment

Although only around 35 miles from the centre of London, the Surrey town of Godalming has made a virtue of staying out of the limelight.

Its heavily wooded hills and sprawling heathland areas are well known to walkers – as well as Hollywood film location scouts – and the surrounding town and villages have become a quiet refuge for commuters returning from the capital each evening.

But now the area's low profile is under threat after it was identified as, in effect, the best place to live in Great Britain.

According to The Halifax, people living in the borough of Waverley, which is centred around Godalming, enjoy the best overall quality of life in the country.

It topped a list of areas because of its combination of relative prosperity, employment, good health, house prices and even weather.

Average life expectancy for a man in Waverley is almost 81 years, well above the national average and 97 per cent of people in the area were deemed to be in "good health".

The average weekly wage is £888 – 46 per cent above the national average. Yet house prices are deemed to be affordable by London standard – averaging £325,000 for a property.

Councillor Tony Gordon-Smith, the mayor of Waverley, said: "I'm not at all surprised. "The quality of the people here is second to none: people are happy, help one another – and we do also have some excellent pubs.

Uttlesford in Essex, East Hertfordshire, Chilterns in Buckinghamshire and Maldon in Essex all made it into the top five in the list which is dominated by the south and east of England.

Selby, North Yorks, ranked 34th is the highest placed northern town in Halifax's top 50 "Rural Quality of Life" list, which excludes larger towns.

Waverley takes its name from the ruined Cistercian abbey outside Farnham, which also lent its name to Sir Walter Scott's fictional hero Edward Waverley

The nearby Bourne Wood has become a favoured film location used as the backdrop for scenes in Gladiator, various instalments of the Harry Potter series and more recently War Horse.

Although home to Charterhouse, the public school, Godalming itself has kept a low profile, even by the standards of its near neighbour Guildford.

Residents still speak with pride of the electric street lighting installed in 1881, the first in the world, and the fact that Tsar Peter the Great once stayed the night in the King's Arms Inn.

Located midway on London-Portsmouth highway, Godalming was once major staging post, especially for sailors travelling from the Admiralty to the fleet.

“The area lost its way a bit when the railway went straight through,” admits Cllr Gordon-Smith.

“We used to have 5,000 horses here every night – producing enough manure to make enough gunpowder to defeat Napoleon.”

One regular visitor was Gen Charles Lennox, the 2nd Duke of Richmond, who according to Cllr Gordon-Smith used Church House in Godalming for his “cavorting” and died there in 1750. “The ghost that stalks the house still has a grin on his face,” he said.

He added that the area’s new status could mean it will no longer be the “best kept secret” in the South East.

But shrugging off the accolade, he added: “Godalming is a delightful small town, well worth a detour, almost worth a journey in fact.”

Martin Ellis, housing economist at Halifax, said: “Waverley has performed consistently strongly across a wide range of indicators for a number of years, and the latest survey found residents here now have the best quality of life in rural Britain.

“While Waverley is not the top area in any one indicator, its strength is that it performs strongly across the board. “The average resident has a high weekly income, enjoys above average health and life expectancy and low crime rates.

But while they also benefit from a big home with central heating, living there does not come with a hefty price tag, with house prices relative to earnings below the average for rural areas.”