

Robertsbridge seemed like a good choice for this slot in the November issue, as the village holds the last Bonfire meeting of the season, and a lot of Lewes residents have been there for the occasion. I'd never been myself, but had always wanted to: I've seen excited Bonfire Boys getting ready for the night, with a gleam in their eye, and their remaining stock of bangers in a bag. I couldn't, it turns out, have chosen a worse time to go, though. I'd vaguely heard that there had been a murder there a few days before my visit was planned, but I hadn't realised that the whole place had been crawling with journalists all week, nosing round with their cameras and notebooks, asking tactless questions, intruding on the village's need to privately grieve. There had been live-broadcast trucks, I later learnt, and a paparazzo helicopter. People's phones hadn't stopped ringing. One of the pubs had put up a sign reading 'No Reporters'. And here was I, happily unaware, camera round my neck, and notebook in my pocket, hoping to learn a little about the history of the village, and what it was like to live in. I'd some days earlier found a guide, as always, by digging around on the internet, and phoning him up. David Allen, a local councillor, and a keen local historian, as well, was kind enough to agree to host me. The perfect type for the job. He lives near the station, too, and minutes after arriving (a 1hr 20 min journey, changing at St Leonards Warrior Square) I was sitting on his sofa, asking about the place.

It was he who told me about all the journalists, and warned me they had been especially intrusive in the Seven Stars, the village's most prominent pub, the one with the sign on the door. He also told me a lot about the village's history, and what it was like to live there. The more he told me – in his sitting room, then strolling round the village – the more I realised that Robertsbridge was like a 'mini-Lewes'. Many of the houses in the centre of the village were timber-framed, and dated back to medieval times. It had had a Cistercian abbey, which had moved, and then been dissolved by Henry VIII. It had been a market-centre for the villages around it since the 13th century. It had had strong non-conformist tendencies after the Reformation. It was highly self sufficient, and the people there felt a singular pride about the place. It had been self-sustaining, industry wise, but its main employer had folded some years ago (in this case a large flour mill) and in recent years house prices had risen, with commuters moving in and many locals being priced out the market. It had suffered terribly in October 2000, when the river it was built on, the Rother, flooded its banks. Sound familiar? There was an expression that he used about the place, that it was a 'living village', which stuck in my mind. Some places with its kind of population (2,624, in the 2001 census) are little more than leafy dormitories; walking round the centre of Robertsbridge I saw a butcher, a chemist, two florists, two convenience stores,

a book shop, a bank, three pubs, a charity shop, two dentists' surgeries, one doctor's surgery, a cycle shop, a primary school, a pre-primary school, an Indian restaurant and a hairdresser's, called Scissors. It boasts its own comprehensive school, with 550 pupils the smallest Community College in the county. It even houses a private-property-eschewing religious community, the Darvell, numbering 300, with their own play equipment factory, just west of the village. Oh, and I nearly forgot to mention – Gray Nicholls, the most prestigious cricket bat makers in the world, have their HQ and factory in the village, so many of the world's most famous batsmen bat with local willow. David showed me the village's state-of-the-art flood defences, the parish church in the nearby hamlet of Salehurst, the village's oldest cottages (dating back to 1380) and left me at a 'safe' pub, so I could have a bite to eat. It was called the George, and I was made to feel very welcome. I even felt bold enough to get out my notebook, so I could write down all the impressions I'd been storing up. Fortified by a plate of cod and chips and a pint of Cobblers (from the Rother Valley Brewery), I ventured back into the village, to take photographs, feeling extremely self-conscious, hoping to be taken for a tourist, rather than a journalist. I got a funny look from just about everyone who saw me, truth be told, but I couldn't blame them. Next time I go to Robertsbridge, hopefully, it will be in less tragic circumstances. *Alex Leith*