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Aiming high

Surrounded by open countryside, yet just six miles from Birmingham, this park site enjoys the best of both worlds. Phil Tolhurst reports

Do you want to know a secret? Then make your way to the top of Barr Beacon (745ft above sea level). Historically, because it is the highest point in the Midlands, this is the site of a beacon where fires have been lit in order to signal impending attack or to celebrate some great occasion.

Quite a lot of people know that. But, there is something more.

Here you also have a bird's eye view of the city of Birmingham, about six miles to the south. But now turn your eyes due east.

You will not be able to see them because of the distance and the curvature of the earth. Nonetheless, there is nothing

higher than Barr Beacon in that direction than the Ural Mountains, around 2,000 miles away in Russia.

The area around the Beacon is green-belt land of importance for nature conservation. It's a popular spot for stretching one's legs, enjoying fresh air and, of course, drinking in the view.

Visible on a clear day are Dudley Castle, 10 miles to the south west, and the Long Mynd, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 35 miles due west.

Here too is the site of a residential park home estate

Left: View of Barr Beacon, the highest point in the Midlands

Right: Several of the residents have homes with lovely views overlooking the two lakes



Left: The homes, gardens and communal grounds have all been well looked after

Right: There are 75 park homes at Beacon Heights; two-thirds are twin units

named, appropriately enough, Beacon Heights.

Spread over six acres of gently sloping land with views across the surrounding pony paddocks, meadows and two lakes, the estate is one of seven owned by Hartley Park Homes.

This family business was established by the late Tom Hartley Snr and is now run

“The whole area gives the impression of being well maintained. No shortage of TLC on this park!”

jointly by his son, Asa, and daughter, Helen.

Hartley took over Beacon Heights in 1987 but there has been a park here for more than 40 years. Licensed for 75 homes, two-thirds of them twin units,



it contains a varied mixture of makes and models. Along with the open-plan gardens, mainly laid to grass, the whole area gives the impression of being well maintained. No shortage of TLC here.

There is some parking on hard-standings alongside homes (no garages) but most is in a series of small car parks dotted around the estate.

The good life

Residents are split more or less equally between singletons and couples, with around three-quarters fully retired. The longest established has been on site for no less than 40 years.

Feeling well and truly at home after 27 years in residence at Beacon Heights are Ron and Eileen Bragg. Originally from Aldridge, just up the road, they previously lived in Australia, having emigrated there 17 months earlier. It didn't work out ('Too hot!') so they came back, paid £12,500 for their eight-year-old 36ft x 20 Omar and moved to Beacon Heights.

'We've had a good, happy life but that was the best thing we've ever done,' said Ron, with Eileen nodding in agreement. Her brother and his wife obviously agreed because they too then moved to the park.

Come October, the Braggs will have been married for 58 years and are already looking forward to celebrating their diamond-wedding anniversary two years later.

Both are now retired. Ron took early retirement from his job as a maintenance fitter with Jaguar. Eileen, who formerly did admin for the police, continued working as a home carer until she was 73.

'I was Carer of the Year in the West Midlands in 1972,' she told me, proudly. Eileen still keeps her hand in, looking after a neighbour who is in need of regular support.

To recharge their batteries, the Braggs like to holiday abroad – they have been to Benidorm on no fewer than 12 occasions. In between, there are trips up to Scotland to visit their daughter and her family.

In their absence, the neighbours – 'Excellent, we couldn't do better' – keep an eye on their home.

There is no resident manager on site to do such things. But a

INFO

PLOT FEES

Single units
£95.77 pcm; twin
units £107.25pcm.

WATER & SEWERAGE

Included in the plot fee.

ELECTRICITY

Billed by the utility.

GAS

Individual bulk tanks (10 per cent of owners are on oil).

COUNCIL TAX

Band A – £1,016 for 2009-10.

PARK RULES

55s and over; pets allowed at the park owners' discretion.

HOMES FOR SALE

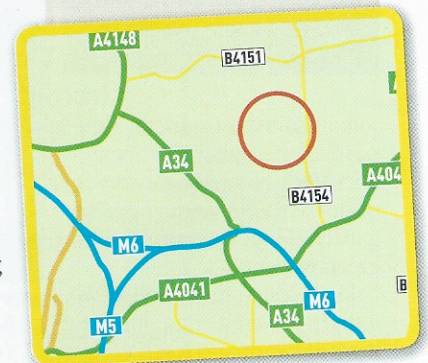
When we visited there were two vacant plots: one for a single unit with a guideline price of £110,000; the other for a twin at around £150,000.

PARK OWNER

Hartley Park Homes,
Baswich Lane,
Stafford ST17 0YE
T: 01785 256 798 E: info@
hartleyparkhomes.com. W:
www.hartleyparkhomes.com

VISIT THE PARK

Beacon Heights, Pinfold Lane,
Barr Beacon, Walsall, West
Midlands WS9 0QX



maintenance team calls weekly to cut the grass and sort out any problems. Other weekly visitors include the dustmen to empty wheely bins containing general refuse. Two more wheely bins per home, one for general recycled materials and the other for garden refuse, are emptied fortnightly.

One couple who make





maximum use of that particular service are June and Mick Hawker who have done extensive work on their garden. Mick is the one with green fingers.

He is also a dab hand with a high-powered telescope (x675 magnification, no less). With it set up on a tripod in his living room, Mick can clearly see close up the flag flying on top of Dudley Castle 10 miles away. That's not to mention bird watching and star gazing.

The Hawkers used to live in Great Barr, just a mile or so away. In fact, they chose Beacon Heights because it was close to home and in an area with which they were so familiar. As

Above: These residents have created a garden to reflect their personality Inset: Many residents enjoy decorating their plots with ornaments

both are still working – June as a part-time car-park attendant, Mick in factory maintenance – it was handy for work too. Having sold their three-bedroom terraced house in 2006, this couple paid £155,000 for their new 40ft x 20 Omar

Above: While there are no garages alongside the homes there is still plenty of parking

“Peace and quiet, low maintenance and an absence of traffic are the main reasons to buy a home at Beacon Heights.”

Sandringham. Peace and quiet, low maintenance and an absence of traffic were the main reasons for their decision to buy a park home at Beacon Heights. And they haven't been disappointed, either.

Something the Hawkers share in common with neighbours Chris and Lynn O'Meara is a love of birds. But whereas June and Mick use a telescope to spot them, the O'Mearas have some in their lounge: a pair of love birds called Pinky and Perky.

Chris and Lynn are the most recent arrivals at Beacon Heights, having moved into their 36ft x 20 Homeseeker Pendle a year ago from Erdington near Birmingham. Their decision to buy a park home – it cost them £101,500, reduced from £115,000 – came as a result of both being made

QUICK CHAT OVER A CUPPA



RON AND EILEEN BRAGG, who have been resident on Beacon Heights for 27 years, describe buying their 1975 36ft x 20 Omar home there as 'the best thing we have ever done! ▼



CHRIS & LYNN O'MEARA were both made redundant last year but have managed to pay off their debts by releasing equity from their bricks and mortar home and buying a park home. ▼



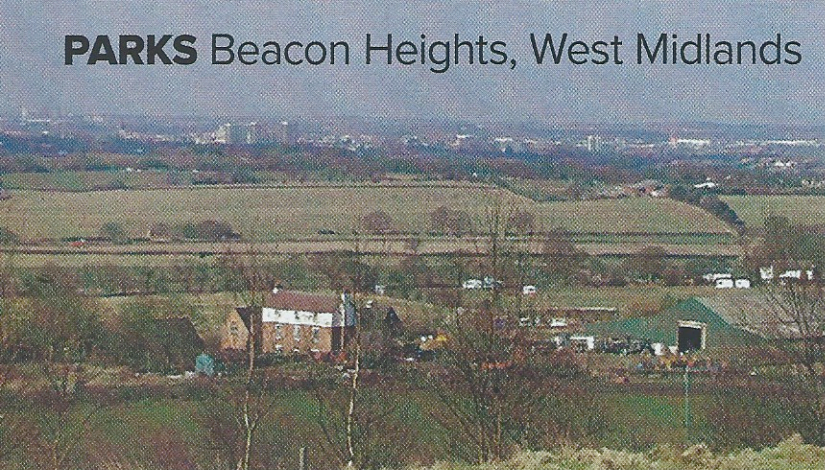
JUNE AND MICK HAWKER decided to buy a new 40ft x 20 Omar Sandringham on Beacon Heights because it was in a familiar area just a mile from where they used to live. ▼



redundant by the same company, which was relocating to Germany.

Their move enabled the O'Mearas to pay off their mortgage and clear some other debts, giving them breathing space in which to think about

PARKS Beacon Heights, West Midlands



Above: The view from Barr Beacon

Left: Meet the 'neigh'-bours. Pony paddocks nestle the park's boundaries

Right: Immaculate gardens are a common theme throughout



early retirement and consider the future.

How has it been so far, I asked them.

'Fabulous,' was the reply.

'We have had a new kitchen fitted; built a patio to make the most of the view. And the neighbours are so helpful. It's been great.'

Local amenities

A residents' association looks after all the homeowners' affairs and has a good working relationship with the Hartleys.

But no formal social events or outings are organized and, not surprisingly given the size of this park, there are no amenities on site.

You don't need to go far to find some, though. Less than a mile down the road there are a number of shops, including a newsagent, butcher's and post office. Just two miles away is an

Asda supermarket open 24 hours a day.

Doctors' and dental surgeries can be found in Aldridge, a mile up the road; a hospital with A&E, about three miles away in Walsall, where there is also a cinema and a theatre.

"This is one of the closest parks to Birmingham, although that's difficult to imagine when relaxing alongside one of the nearby lakes."

And of course Birmingham, with all the services and amenities of a full-blown city, is only half a dozen miles along the M6 motorway, itself just a mile distant via Junction 7.

Wandering around Beacon

Heights in peace and quiet, with its rural setting and country views, you would never guess that you were only half a dozen miles from the centre of such a bustling city. In fact, this is one of the closest parks to Birmingham, a definite plus point if you want or need easy access to the city centre.

It becomes even more difficult to imagine how close that is when relaxing alongside one of the nearby lakes enjoying some carp fishing. Day tickets are easily obtainable for the residents.

There is no shortage of country pubs. Nearest is the Cat & Fiddle, less than a mile up the road. If you are into pub crawls, another three can be found close by: the Old Horns, followed by The Foley, finishing up with the Hardwick Arms a mile further on. (Cheers!)

To catch a bus all you need

do is walk out of the park entrance: the bus stop is just opposite. Services operate seven days a week on an hourly timetable. By changing, you can catch a bus into the centre of Birmingham if you wish.

Walsall, three miles away, is the nearest railway station. Trains run to London Euston, the journey taking, at best, fractionally over two hours with one change.

Drive and the 125-mile journey will take you two hours and 35 minutes according to the AA.

To catch a plane, make for Birmingham International Airport, 20 miles and 33 minutes' drive away according to the AA. There are flights to destinations all over Europe as well as further afield to the Americas, Africa and Asia, not to mention various airports in the British Isles. ●

Great days out!

3 easy-to-reach attractions close to Beacon Heights



TAME VALLEY CANAL

Eight miles long with twin towpaths, it runs from Walsall Canal to Salford Junction.



CHASEWATER RAILWAY

A four-mile, 45-minute round trip on heritage steam and diesel trains.



LETOCETUM BATHS

Visit the ruins of Roman baths which are now incorporated into a museum.