



DAY TRIP TO HASTINGS

The first time I spotted the Shirley Leaf and Petal Company's wonderfully retro-looking premises, I blinked and thought I had strayed into Diagon Alley. Like some magical florist's, this is a quite astonishing stash of flowers, leaves and petals – except that every one of them is a cloth imitation, made on the premises or by their team of home-workers. You can buy the product for your own purposes (such as evening wear or weddings) but the big customers are theatres, opera houses, and film and TV companies across the world.

Photo: Tim Locke

The business had its hundredth birthday last year. Originally this trade was taught to disabled women, especially those missing an arm, and is said to be the last surviving business of its kind in Europe. Downstairs is the shop's tiny 'museum' – featuring some 10,000 Victorian cutting tools and flower irons, and still in use. Much of the material they use is antique and of irreplaceable quality: vintage taffeta, silk and velvet from long-defunct English textile mills. You can come home from this memorable factory visit with an inexpensive souvenir: buttonholes typically range from 50p to a tenner.

Tim Locke

58a High Street, Hastings tel: 01424 427793. Open Monday to Saturday; museum open 10-4.

More details of this and other Slow pleasures in Tim Locke's *Slow Sussex* which we're delighted to announce has been nominated by the Great British Travel Press as Travel Guide Book of the Year. You can buy a copy from SkyLark, Lewes TIC and Barbi-can House. Visit facebook.com/slowsussex