

News

'I went to England's least-visited tourist attraction and had a huge surprise in store

THE HIDDEN SPOT IN THE ROLLING WOLDS OF EAST YORKSHIRE DESERVES A CLOSER LOOK

By DEBORAH HALL

deborah.hall@reachplc.com
@DeborahHall15

I MUST be honest, I didn't know what to expect of a visitor attraction calling itself The Computer Sheds.

I only became aware of the said spot when figures from Visit England's annual attractions survey came out. Topping the table as the least visited place of the lot was The Computer Sheds.

It seemed oddly placed, being described as "rural" and yet categorised as a "science and technology centre" in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

The Computer Sheds falls under the tourism body's visitor admission bracket of 10,000 or less - it actually only had 35 visitors recorded there for the whole of 2023.

This figure was a drop from 2022, when 50 people visited, and an even bigger fall from 2021 when 150 visitors were recorded.

Intrigued, I decided I had to go and find out what The Computer Sheds is all about.

Located in the village of Fimber, a pretty, tucked-away spot in the heart of the rolling Yorkshire Wolds, the sat-nav was just about

successful in helping to locate The Computer Sheds, home of Jim Austin's fascinating, and huge, I was about to discover, collection of computer-related history.

My on-board car tech considered I'd reached my destination when I got to Fimber church; The Computer Sheds was just a little further down the lane and it looked like I was driving straight into a farm.

I wasn't too far wrong - retired lecturer Jim Austin's pride and passion is a private collection of more than 1,500 computers and many more thousands of other related artefacts, including books, calculators (there is one Jim built himself from a kit when he was a child), spares and test equipment - all housed in a series of former pig sheds.

He opens the collection, which represents the technical development of computing from the earliest to the present day, that he has been compiling since about 1986, by appointment, for guided tours to groups and curious individuals like me.

What's inside is mind-blowing. From floor to ceiling, neatly arranged and with gangways through their midst, are examples from every generation of computing, from



the earliest mechanical means of computing to supercomputers.

Arranged by manufacturer, the collection occupies more than 10,000sq ft of space and also features one of Jim's particular passions, a fine assemblage of radios and valves, in the RadioShed. There are other quirky items to see, including the jet engine from a Vulcan bomber and a Sinclair C5, an electrically powered tricycle, just because, says Jim: "It's a case of preserving things, and I love to know how things work."

"People offer me their collections and I don't say no to anything. You never know what they have got - and I can always make room for more."

BBC Two's *Collectaholics*, a series exploring the weird and wonderful world of some Britain's passionate, avid and sometimes downright obsessive collectors, came to The Computer Sheds to film, with presenter Jasmine Harman sharing some of Jim's amazing items with viewers.

There are some that are incredible because of their sheer size, one computer weighs over ten tons, and because of their provenance.

Probably a favourite of Jim, a

former professor of neural computation at York University, is Stephen Hawking's last supercomputer.

The SGI-manufactured shared-memory piece of super kit is the one the late Prof Hawking hoped would open up new windows on our universe.

Jim said: "It's the machine he used every day, the first of its kind. It's got lots of memory in it and it looks great. I spent three months getting it going again."

Jim, who sadly had to give up his job because of Parkinson's, the first he knew of it was when he got "a slight shake in my left arm," said his continuing collection gives him a focus.

He now owns, for instance, one of the largest collections on show of Cray's and Digital Equipment Corporation computers anywhere in the world.

Much smaller, but ever-so significant is one of the first ever computer mice, a prototype for the world's first mass-produced mouse.

On the day of my visit, I enquired about a machine that was whirring away and obviously active in one of the sheds.

Jim, who began collecting radios, and taking them apart, when he was five said: "I'm designing my own robot - I love robots. That's a 3D printer and it's making some wheels for it."

You don't need to be a computer nerd to enjoy a visit to The Computer Sheds, as I can testify. People of any age, kids and upwards, will be fascinated by what Jim has, and he can tailor visits, which must be booked in advance, to the relevant level of knowledge and interest.

He requests donations, typically £10 per person, for his tours, with around three hours recommended for a visit.

The Jim Austin Computer Collection relies on a band of helpers, or "Shedders", to operate, and they meet fortnightly throughout the year to help with moving, mending and maintaining things.

Jim also welcomes information about all of the machines in his collection, both technical and personal, from anyone with experience of them.

■ Please email Jim Austin at jim.austin@york.ac.uk for more information or to book a visit.



Computer Sheds Museum - Jim Austin Collection