

Chapter 15

Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring Knole, one of England's largest homes
- ▶ Visiting Anne Boleyn's Hever Castle
- ▶ Calling at Chartwell, home of Winston Churchill
- ▶ Lollygagging in Leeds Castle
- ▶ Strolling through the great garden at Sissinghurst
- ▶ Viewing the White Cliffs from Dover Castle

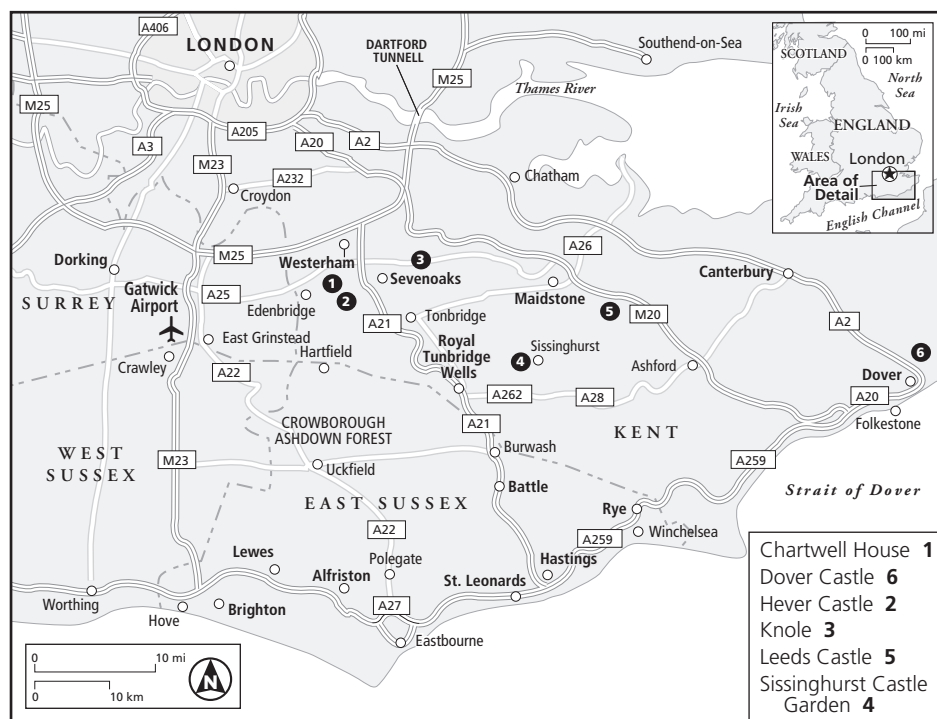
The county of Kent is rich in castles, stately homes, and magnificent gardens. All are within about 50 miles of London, so you can visit them on day trips. Alternatively, you can incorporate Kent's most famous sights into a car tour of the Southeast. (For ideas on towns to visit, see Chapter 14.)

Kent is known as the Garden of England (see the "Kent's Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens" map in this chapter). A mild year-round climate favors Kent, where fruit grows and hops ripen in the summer sun. Old walled orchards and conical *oast* (hops-drying) houses are still part of the landscape. Kent has more gardens open to the public than any other county in England. With the one exception of Dover Castle, the castles and stately homes that I describe in this chapter all have superbly landscaped grounds.

Don't worry about finding a meal. In every castle, home, and garden you find at least one restaurant or tea shop where you can get lunch, a snack, or tea.

274 Part IV: The Southeast

Kent's Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens



The places in this chapter are all in the country. They're near small towns with rail stations but not always within easy walking distance of the station. You can, however, visit them all by train or bus, continuing by taxi when necessary. Taxis are generally available outside the train stations. If you drive yourself, make sure that you have a good map with you. I do provide directions to each sight, but as soon as you're off the motorway and main roads, Kent is full of winding lanes. The attractions have parking on-site or in parking lots.



The Web site www.traintaxi.co.uk provides information about taxi service from every train station in England. The site gives you the phone numbers of local taxi companies so that you can make reservations and have a cab waiting when you arrive.

Knole: A Room for Every Day of the Year

Set in a picturesque deer park, this great country homestead houses important collections of portraits, silver, tapestries, and 17th-century

Chapter 15: Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens **275**

furniture. What makes **Knole** so wonderfully unique is its size and the fact that the house has remained basically unaltered since 1603. A visit here is an ideal day trip from London; be sure to give yourself at least three hours to take it all in.

Getting to Knole

Frequent train service connects Sevenoaks Station, 1½ miles from the Knole, to London's Charing Cross Station. The journey takes 30 minutes and costs about £8.50 (\$14) for a day-return (round-trip) ticket. Call ☎ **08457/484-950** for train schedules. From the rail station, you can walk to the park entrance in the center of Sevenoaks or take the connecting hourly bus service. You can also find cabs at the station or call **Bluebird** ☎ **01732/45531** to reserve one in advance; one-way taxi fare to the entrance is about £3 (\$4.80). By car, Knole is 5 miles north of Tonbridge, off A225.

Exploring Knole

With its skyline of gables, chimneys, battlements, and pinnacles, this enormous house resembles an entire village. Like a well-protected medieval community, Knole has a central gatehouse with an inner gatehouse (Bourchier's Tower). The gatehouses may conjure up visions of a traditional castle, but they are, in fact, entirely decorative.

Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, purchased the land and original house at Knole in 1456. He set about transforming the fortresslike building into a home suitable for Princes of the Church (the archbishop of Canterbury, as the spiritual head of the Church of England, wielded enormous wealth and power). Four more archbishops resided at Knole before Henry VIII took possession of the house (just as he took possession of Hampton Court Palace, home of Cardinal Wolsey). Henry VIII enlarged Knole until it was suitable as a royal palace, but he never spent much time there. His daughter, Elizabeth I, presented the house and estate to her cousin Thomas Sackville, the 1st Earl of Dorset, in 1566. His descendants have lived at Knole ever since. Knole was the childhood home of Vita Sackville-West, who created the gardens at Sissinghurst Castle. (See the section, "Sissinghurst Castle Garden: Romance amongst the Roses," later in this chapter.)

In 1603, the 1st Earl enlarged and embellished what would become one of England's greatest houses. Occupying some 4 acres, Knole was built with seven courtyards, representing the days of the week, 52 staircases, one for each week of the year, and 365 rooms, one for every day of the year. The 13 state rooms open to the public are magnificent representatives of the Elizabethan and Stuart eras. Rooms that you can tour include three long galleries, each with an adjoining state bedroom, and the King's Bedroom, which has a 17th-century bed decorated with gold and silver thread and topped with ostrich feathers.

276 Part IV: The Southeast

In addition to its outstanding tapestries and textiles, important portraits by Van Dyck, Gainsborough, and Reynolds fill the house. Among the house's original features are the fine plasterwork ceilings, the carved wooden screen in the Hall, and the painted walls of the staircases. The elaborate marble and alabaster chimneypiece and mantle in the Ballroom (the former living quarters of Archbishop Bouchier) stretches from floor to ceiling and is considered one of the finest works of Renaissance sculpture in England.

Large herds of fallow and Japanese deer roam the parkland surrounding the house. The private garden is open only once a month and requires separate admission. A tearoom where you can get lunch or tea is on the premises.

Tonbridge Road, Sevenoaks. ☎ 01732/462-100 or 01732/450-608 (recorded information). Admission: house £5.50 (\$9) adults, £2.75 (\$4) children 4–15, £13.75 (\$22) families (2 adults, 2 children); garden £2 (\$3.20) adults, £1 (\$1.60) children 4–15; deer park free to pedestrians. Open: house Mar 22–Nov 2 Wed–Sun 10:30 a.m.–5 p.m.; garden May–Sept first Wed of the month 11 a.m.–4 p.m.; park open daily; tearoom Mar 22–Nov 2 Wed–Sun 1–4.30 p.m.

Hever Castle: Anne Boleyn Slept Here

A lovely, moated castle set amid immaculately landscaped gardens 30 miles south of London, **Hever Castle** was the childhood home of Anne Boleyn (1507–1536), the second wife of Henry VIII. Anne of Cleves, Henry's fourth wife, also lived here. In 1903, the American millionaire William Waldorf Astor bought the castle and created the beautiful gardens. Hever is a fairly easy day trip from London. Give yourself at least an hour for the house and another two hours to enjoy the gardens.

Getting to Hever Castle

From London's Victoria Station, trains depart throughout the day for two stations near Hever Castle. The trip takes an hour and costs about \$10.50 (\$17) for a day round-trip ticket. You must change trains at East Croyden. From **Hever Station**, it's a pretty 1-mile, 15-minute walk to the castle. Taxis aren't available at this station. **Edenbridge Town Station** is 3 miles from the castle. From the station, you can take a taxi to the castle. Booking a cab in advance is a good idea; without doing so, you may have to wait for an hour or more. Call **Rely On Cars** (☎ 01732/863-800) or **Edenbridge Cars** (☎ 01732/864-009); the one-way taxi fare from the train station to the castle is about \$5 (\$8).

Chapter 15: Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens **277**



On Sunday, you may have to get off at the **Edenbridge Station** and take a taxi to the castle; one-way fares are about \$5 (\$8). For taxi companies, see the preceding information for Edenbridge Town Station. If you're traveling to Hever Castle on a Sunday, always check to find out whether the train stops at Edenbridge Town Station or Edenbridge Station.

By car, Hever Castle is 3 miles southeast of Edenbridge, midway between Sevenoaks and East Grinstead off B2026. From London, take the M25 and exit at junction 5 or 6.

Exploring Hever Castle

Hever Castle's long and varied history stretches back over seven centuries. To experience this rich history, you can wander through the rooms in the castle at your own pace; guides can answer your questions.

The castle's stone gatehouse and outer walls were constructed in the 13th century. In about 1500, the Boleyn (or Bullen, as it was then written) family added a more comfortable Tudor manor house within the walls. In the middle of divorcing his first wife, Catharine of Aragon, Henry VIII wooed Anne Boleyn at Hever Castle.



Henry VIII's desire for Anne Boleyn helped change the course of English history. When Catharine of Aragon didn't produce a male heir, the king turned his eye to Anne. Hoping that the 25-year-old Anne would give him the successor he wanted, Henry sought to divorce Catherine. When the pope refused Henry's request, Henry broke with the Catholic Church and established the Church of England with himself as head. He then married Anne, but she also failed to deliver a male child. (Her first child was Elizabeth I, who became one of England's greatest monarchs.) Eventually, Henry had Anne arrested on trumped-up charges of adultery and incest with her brother George. Both Boleyn siblings were executed, George first and then the unfortunate Anne, who was beheaded at the Tower of London. She is sometimes known as Anne of the Thousand Days because that's how long she was queen.

After Anne's demise and the death in childbirth of his third wife, Jane Seymour, the much-married monarch gave Hever Castle to his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, who lived there after Henry divorced her. You can view costumed likenesses of Anne, Henry, and his other five wives in the **waxwork exhibition**, "The Six Wives of Henry VIII," on the top floor of the castle.

William Waldorf Astor acquired Hever Castle in 1903 and spent a fortune restoring it. What you see today is a result of Astor's preservation efforts. Inside, splendid carving and paneling cover the castle walls. Antiques, some interesting works of art, including portraits of Anne Boleyn and her daughter, Elizabeth, and a Holbein painting of Henry VIII fill the rooms. You can also view two of Anne's prayer books. In 2003, two newly acquired portraits of Mary Queen of Scots went on display.

278 Part IV: The Southeast

The **gatehouse**, which is the last room you visit, contains a grisly collection of torture instruments, including beheading axes. Anne asked for a French axe to be used on her neck — she knew French axes did a quicker, cleaner job.

Further enhancing the castle's romantic setting, Astor created the magnificent **gardens** between 1904 and 1908, which include the **Italian Garden**, filled with statuary and sculpture collected in Italy and dating from Roman to Renaissance times; the **Maze**; a 35-acre lake; and the **rose garden**. The **Tudor herb garden**, close to the castle, opened in 1994.

Two self-service restaurants serving hot lunches, snacks, and teas are on the premises.

Edenbridge. ☎ 01732/865-224. Admission: castle and garden £8.40 (\$13) adults, £7.10 (\$11) seniors, £4.60 (\$7) children 5–15, £21.40 (\$34) families (2 adults, 2 children). Open: April–Oct daily, gardens 11 a.m.–5 p.m., castle noon to 5 p.m.; March and Nov until 4 p.m. Closed Dec–Feb.

Chartwell: The Private Life of a Famous Prime Minister

Chartwell House was the home of Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965) from 1924 until he died. The home can't compare with the grandeur of Blenheim Palace (see Chapter 13), where Churchill was born, but if you're interested in the personal life of Britain's wartime prime minister and one of its great statesmen, **Chartwell** will fascinate you. Give yourself at least 1½ hours to visit the house and gardens. If you're driving, you can easily combine a visit to Chartwell with a visit to Hever Castle or Knole.

Getting to Chartwell

From London's Charing Cross Station, you can hop on frequent train service to **Sevenoaks**, 6½ miles east of Chartwell, and to **Oxted**, 6 miles west of Chartwell. The journey takes about 40 minutes and costs about £8.50 (\$14) for a day-return (round-trip) ticket. Call ☎ **08457/484-950** for train schedules. From either station you can take a cab to Chartwell. To reserve a taxi from Sevenoaks, call **Bluebird** (☎ **01732-45531**); from Oxted, call **Terrys** (☎ **01883/712-623**) or **D Line** (☎ **01883/715-576**). The taxi fare is approximately £8 (\$13).

By car, Chartwell is 2 miles south of Westerham; fork left off B2026 after 1½ miles.

Chapter 15: Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens **279**

Exploring Chartwell House

The National Trust administers Chartwell, a family home where the rooms and gardens remain much as Churchill left them. Churchill's watercolors, pictures, maps, and personal mementos are on display throughout, and you see first editions of his books (Churchill won the Nobel Prize for Literature). His energy and range of interests was prodigious: You can trace his career from his school days at Harrow to his years as a war correspondent, Chancellor of the Exchequer, parliamentarian, and prime minister. Some of his famous uniforms and hats are on display, and you can hear tapes of his speeches. In addition to the house, you can visit the beautiful terraced gardens containing the lakes he dug, the brick wall he built with his own hands, the water garden where he fed his fish, and his garden studio, which holds many of his paintings.

Westerham. ☎ 01732/866-368. Admission: house, garden, and studio £6.50 (\$10) adults, £3.25 (\$5) children 5–15, £16.25 (\$26) families (2 adults, 2 children). Open: Mar 22–June and Sept 3–Nov 9 Wed–Sun 11 a.m.–5:30 p.m.; July–Aug Tues–Sun 11 a.m.–5:30 p.m.; Nov 12–Dec 21 Wed–Sun 10:30 a.m.–5 p.m.

Leeds Castle: Castle of Queens, Queen of Castles

Leeds Castle, tucked away in the Kent countryside 40 miles southeast of London, is one of the world's most beautiful castles. Built on two small islands, its stone facade mirrored in a lake, this treasure trove of history has enough in its rooms and gardens to beguile you for half your day. Coming here is an easy day trip by train or bus from London, or you may want to combine a visit with an overnight trip to Canterbury or Rye (see Chapter 14).

Getting to Leeds Castle

Trains run frequently from London's Victoria Station to **Maidstone** and **Bearsted** stations; the latter is closer to the castle. **Connex** (☎ 0870/603-0405; www.connex.co.uk) offers an all-in-one ticket to Bearsted Station with connecting bus service to and from the castle; the cost is £21.50 (\$34) for adults, £10.80 (\$17) for children. **National Express** (☎ 08705/808-080; www.nationalexpress.co.uk) runs a "Days Out" bus-and-admission package from London's Victoria Coach Station every day that the castle is open. Buses leave at 9 a.m. and arrive at Leeds Castle at 10:30 a.m. Depending on the day you travel, the package costs £15 to £17 (\$24 to \$27) for adults, £10 to £12 (\$16 to \$19) for children. By car, from London's ring road, continue east along the M26 and M20; the castle is 4 miles east of Maidstone at the junction of A20 and the M20.

280 Part IV: The Southeast

Exploring Leeds Castle

Part of Leeds' fascination lies in the stories of its various owners. The castle reflects the changing tastes and fortunes of several families and dozens of generations. The original buildings were wood, constructed in A.D. 857 during the Saxon era. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, the buildings were given to the French Crevecoeur family, who rebuilt them in stone. The castle's vineyard (still producing) is listed in the *Domesday Book*, tax records compiled in 1086. Under Edward I, in 1278, Leeds became a royal palace. During the medieval era, six queens of England lived there. Faces from many eras greet you as you walk through the castle. Look for the portrait of Catharine of Valois (it hangs near her apartments). Catherine, the widow of Henry V, eloped with Owen Tudor. Henry VIII, their great-grandson, stayed at the castle often, and added the Tudor windows.

By the mid-16th century, Leeds was no longer a royal palace. A house was built on the larger island in the early 1600s. An owner in the 18th century, the 6th Lord Fairfax, owned 5 million acres of land in Virginia and was a mentor and friend to George Washington. After several more owners, Olive Lady Baillie purchased the house in 1926 and completely transformed the inside. Her collections of medieval and Renaissance tapestries, Chinese porcelain, paintings, and furniture give Leeds Castle a sumptuous quality.

The tour of Leeds Castle begins in the **Norman Cellar**, passes through the medieval **Queen's Rooms**, and into Henry VIII's richly decorated **Banqueting Hall**. The circuit then takes you into a suite of rooms decorated in the 1920s. In the Gatehouse, where you enter, is something dog lovers won't want to miss: the **Dog Collar Museum**, with a collection that dates back to the 16th century.

Your first glimpse of Leeds Castle is from the **Wood Garden and Duckery**, which you pass through on the way to the entrance. In the spring, wood anemones carpet the banks of the stream; swans and wildfowl live here year-round. The **Culpeper Garden**, named for the castle's 17th-century owners, is a large cottage garden planted with lavenders, roses, lupins, and poppies that start blooming in early summer. The **Lady Baillie Garden** takes its inspiration from the Mediterranean. If you reach the center of the **Maze**, you're rewarded with entry into a mysterious underground grotto.

Often overlooked is the **Aviary**, which opened in 1988 and houses more than 100 species of rare and endangered birds, including parrots, toucans, cockatoos, kookaburras, and cranes.

Two restaurants serve hot meals. You also find a tearoom and snack stands throughout the grounds.

Chapter 15: Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens **281**

Maidstone. ☎ **01622/765-400**. Admission: summer, £12 (\$19) adults, £10.50 (\$17) seniors and students, £8.50 (\$13) children 4–15, £35 (\$56) families (2 adults, 2 children); off-season, small discount. Open: daily Apr–Oct 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Nov–Mar 10 a.m.–3 p.m.; closed Dec 25 and on two days in June and July for classical concerts.

Sissinghurst Castle Garden: Romance amongst the Roses

The writer Vita Sackville-West and her diplomat husband, Sir Harold Nicolson, created **Sissinghurst**, one of the world's most famous gardens. Sissinghurst Castle, an Elizabethan manor house with a central red-brick tower, was in ruins when the Nicolson family bought it in 1930. Vita, who had grown up in the huge manor house at Knole (see “Knole: A Room for Every Day of the Year,” earlier in this chapter), developed a garden scheme that is like a series of small, enclosed compartments, intimate in scale, romantic in atmosphere, and filled with color year-round. Her goal was to create a garden of “profusion, extravagance, and exuberance within the confines of the utmost linear severity.”

Getting to Sissinghurst Castle Garden

The nearest train station, **Staplehurst**, is 5½ miles away. Direct trains run from London's Charing Cross Station; the trip takes just under an hour and costs about £7.50 (\$11) for a combined rail-bus ticket. From Staplehurst Station, take Cranbrook bus to the village of Sissinghurst; from there, the castle gardens are an easy 1¼-mile walk on pavement and through countryside. From Staplehurst Station, you can also get a cab; cost one-way to the gardens is about £7 (\$11); to reserve a taxi, call MTC (☎ **01580/890-003**) or Weald (☎ **01850/893-650**). For train information, call ☎ **0845/484-950**. By car, the garden is 2 miles north-east of Cranbrook and 1 mile east of Sissinghurst village on A262.

Exploring Sissinghurst Castle Garden

What you see at Sissinghurst is a beautiful garden with lush plantings that soften a strict formal design. The **White Garden**, with foliage and blossoms that are entirely white or silver, is probably the most celebrated of the several “rooms” that make up Sissinghurst. Every season has its highlights. In April and May, primroses carpet the **Nuttery**, and the **Spring Garden** is full of blossoming daffodils and other bulb plants. The orchard holds an enticing **Wild Garden**. Many people come specifically to see the summer roses. Vita Sackville-West planted hundreds in every form and helped return some lost roses to cultivation. Lovely old varieties climb through trees and over walls. In June and July, a wave of fragrance ascends all over the garden from the thousands of roses blooming everywhere.

282 Part IV: The Southeast

The **library** and the **tower study** where Vita worked are also open to visitors. You can have lunch or tea at the Granary Restaurant on the premises.

Note: Sissinghurst limits the number of guests in its garden at any given time. Upon your arrival, you receive a ticket that indicates your admittance time. Waiting times depend on the season and time of day. If you arrive during peak times (summer 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.), you may have to wait an hour or more for admittance; the garden is least crowded in April, September, and October, and after 4 p.m. on Tuesday to Friday year-round. If you arrive after 4 p.m. on Tuesday to Friday, you get in immediately. No wheelchairs and strollers are admitted (the paths are narrow and uneven), but baby carriers are available.

Sissinghurst, near Cranbrook. ☎ 01580/710-700 or 01580/710-701 (recorded information). Admission: £6.50 (\$11) adults, £3 (\$4.80) children, £16 (\$26) families (2 adults, 2 children). Open: March 22–Nov 2 Fri–Tues 11 a.m.–5.30 p.m., Nov 5–Dec 21 Wed–Sun 11 a.m.–4 p.m.; last admission 1 hour before closing.

Dover Castle: Towers and Tunnels

Dover is one of the busiest Channel ports, with thousands of visitors arriving daily on ferries and hovercrafts from the Continent. Unfortunately, your first impulse upon seeing Dover may be to leave town as quickly as possible. The town is low on charm and has the transient, unfocused air of a place where people pass through but never stay. Many people want to visit Dover to see the famed white cliffs. A better reason to visit — the only reason, in my opinion — is to explore **Dover Castle**. Sitting high on a cliff top, overlooking the Channel, the castle is awash with 2,000 years of history, right through World War II. Dover Castle puts on a good show, one that everyone can enjoy. You can go there as a day trip from London or, if you're arriving in Dover by ferry, you can visit the castle before heading on to other parts of the country. I don't recommend that you stay overnight in Dover.

Getting to Dover Castle

Dover is 77 miles southeast of London, on the English Channel. Frequent train service connects London's Victoria Station to **Dover Priory Station**. The trip takes about one hour and 40 minutes; a round-trip ticket costs about £21 (\$35). Call ☎ 0845/484-950 for train schedules. From the train station, you can walk through the town to the castle — about a 1½-mile trek, part of it uphill — or get a cab right outside the station (the fare will be about £5/\$8). From early May through September, the daily **Guide Friday** (www.guidefriday.com) bus service travels from the station to the castle entrance, stopping at other attractions along the way. The sightseeing bus, which operates hourly between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., costs £6 (\$10) for adults, £5 (\$8) for seniors and

Chapter 15: Kent's Best Castles, Stately Homes, and Gardens **283**

students, and £2.50 (\$4) for children. I don't recommend traveling to Dover from London by bus as a day trip because the trip takes anywhere from two hours and 40 minutes to three hours. **National Express** (☎ 0990/808-080) runs coaches between London's Victoria Coach Station and Dover throughout the day; return fare is £17.50 (\$28). By car, the castle is on the east side of Dover, signposted from the M20 and A2.



The castle covers some 70 acres and offers plenty to see. If you don't want to walk from place to place within the compound, take the free Land Train that makes a circuit of the grounds. You can get a free map when you enter.

Exploring Dover Castle



Start with the **Secret Wartime Tunnels**. The entrance to the tunnels is near the castle's general visitor entrance. You can only visit these tunnels with a **guided tour** (allow 40 minutes), and you may have to wait on busy days, but it's well worth it. The tour takes you into the labyrinth of underground tunnels that were used during World War II as a hospital and general war office. Wartime sound and light effects accompany your visit. The rooms have been preserved as they were during the war; you see the Underground Command Center, the hospital with its operating room, and the living quarters.

The other sites within the castle compound are set up as separate attractions (all included in your ticket price). In the **Keep Yard**, you find an introductory film that you can use to help plan what you want to see. You can view a 2,000-year-old **lighthouse tower** (called "the Roman pharos") dating from the Roman occupation of Britain, and a much-restored Saxon church beside it. The **1216 Siege Experience**, an audio tour of an exhibit that includes sound and light effects, tells the story of the unsuccessful French siege of the castle. You can look out over the channel on the **Battlement Walk** and explore the **Medieval Tunnels**. Kids particularly enjoy the Secret Wartime Tunnels and the 1216 Siege Experience because of the special effects.



For a glimpse of those famed white cliffs of Dover, which are sadly turning a bit brown because of air pollution, climb the steps to **Admiralty Look-out**.

If all this clambering around makes you hungry, head to the restaurant in the Keep Yard, where you can get hot food and snacks.

Dover. ☎ 01304/201-628. Admission: £7 (\$11) adults, £5.30 (\$8) seniors, £3.50 (\$5) children 5–15, £17.50 (\$26) families (2 adults, 2 children). Open: daily April–Sept 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Oct 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Nov–March 10 a.m.–4 p.m.; closed Jan 1, Dec 24 to 26.

284 Part IV: The Southeast