

Travel writer Ken Bennett visits a little known part of Yorkshire and discovers the hills are alive with unusual happenings. The craggy features of celebrity television chef Brian Turner soften as he talks with loving, enthusiastic reverence about ... pork pies.

We are in Ripponden, a pretty dot of a village hidden in a fold of Pennine moor land near Huddersfield, and home of the redoubtable Pork Pie Appreciation Society. For the unworldly, next to a pint of their famous bitter, pork pies, and more to the point their contents are closer to the average Yorkshire man's heart than his wallet. It's a passion that has brought Brian, the star of the hugely popular 'Ready Steady Cook' programme, more than 180 miles from his London restaurants empire to find the county's finest pork pie maker. Because it is judgement day for the famous pie tasters of Ripponden: an event which has the folk in the small towns and hamlets dotting these wild moors holding their breath in excited anticipation. For since its first meeting more than a dozen years ago, the Pork Pie Appreciation Society has gained a formidable reputation for raising and promoting the unabated popularity of these proud products. Their dedicated members, 10 of them meet every Saturday night at the white-painted Old Bridge Inn, a delightfully friendly pub, which claims to be Yorkshire's oldest hostelry and dates back to the 1300's.

But today in the cosy low-slung bar, seated round their own special table with wedge-shaped pints at their elbows, the illustrious society's members prepare for the very serious ritual of finding the very best pie. It is no easy task. Each of the 48 pork pies have to be tasted individually and if, like me, you thought one pie tastes much like another, you'd be very wrong. Taking time out from the pie-laden judging table. Brian explained: 'Pork pies are a real work of culinary art. In fact, some society members are so shrewd they can actually tell you the name of the butcher who made each pie before even tasting them.'

So what qualities must a pie have to tickle the taste buds? 'First there is the actual look of the pie itself,' said Brian. 'It must have an attractive appearance with a crunchy crust that melts on the palate. Then there is the filling: good, hearty pork with just the right amount of fat no tough gristle.'

To underline his point, he selects a sliver of pie. 'See,' he says, 'this is filled almost to the pasty lid itself with quality pork with an excellent texture. 'The members call some pies 'St Paul's Cathedral' because they have a high domed crust and nowt underneath,' he quipped. But, I am pleased to report, the judges found none of those in their deliberations. They happily nibbled, touched and sniffed their way through lines of pies that just seemed simply to beg to be eaten. Proud pies, their crusty lids bursting with mouth-watering aromas, and mighty, almost muscular, pies that cast a formidable shadow over their counterparts down South.



Much later, fortified by a pint or three of ale, the judges chose a pie made by a local butcher who had claimed top honours and a silver trophy twice previously. Just a few miles from the pub. came across another fascinating watering hole with a unique difference: The Standedge Tunnel. This incredible feat of 19th century engineering is one of the seven wonders of the British canal network and is the highest longest and deepest canal tunnel in the country.

Burrowing below 638 feet of solid rock topped by moor land scrub, the tunnel was dug and blasted for more than three miles to link Lancashire to Yorkshire by water and rail.

For a real thrill tourists can actually take a ride into its depths on a specially designed tug which pulls present day canal craft. There, in the stark floodlights, you'll see the holes in the side of the tunnel where barge crew used to 'leg' their way through while their horses were led over the mountainside to rejoin them on the other side. Now British Waterways are busy refurbishing the Standedge Visitors Centre built in a former warehouse on the side of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal. There are a host of interactive attractions spread over two floors, and a series of special events are planned later in the year.

And a visit will give you a chance to sample the belt-busting delights of a meal at the appropriately named Tunnel End Hotel which serves Yorkshire puddings the size of dustbin lids. Meantime, Marsden's villagers are making final preparations for the famous, if slightly wacky, legend of Cuckoo Day, three-days of joyous merrymaking. In fact. wooden replicas of this mysterious bird have started to appear on lamp-posts. In years gone by, locals reckoned the cuckoo's arrival heralded spring and sunshine. And, to

prolong the bird's stay, they tried to build a wall around it but it wasn't high enough and the cuckoo flew away!

Honest, it's true .... But, then again, perhaps I've overdosed on too many pork pies. For information and opening times of the Standedge Visitor Centre, Waters Road Marsden, call British Waterways on: 01484 844298. Boat trips cost £6 a head and are of red subject to availability and have to be booked in advance. The Marsden Cuckoo Day celebrations begin on Friday April 23rd until Sunday April 25th. They include a Cuckoo Ceilidh and a full programme of entertainment. For more details, contact the National Trust's Marsden Moor Estate Office, who can also supply leaflets of interesting walks in the area: 01484 8470 16.

For holidays and short breaks information in Yorkshire, contact The Yorkshire Tourist Board, 31Z Tadcaster Road York YO24 1GS. Tel: 01904 701100.