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## Rare retreat without restrictions

Feeling bombarded by political shenanigans? Peace and solitude can be found at the Krishnamurti Centre in Hampshire, where goodness flows



HARRY EYRES  
SLOW LANE

A couple of weeks ago, to escape the fetid atmosphere of a British election campaign in which everyone knew that nothing important would be decided (the important stuff would come afterwards), I headed off to one of my favourite retreats in the south of England. The Krishnamurti Centre at Brockwood Park in Hampshire is remarkable in several ways. It's an extraordinarily quiet, peaceful place, almost eerily so. If you think of an airport, where increasing quantities of people, commercial activity, hassle, noise are being ever more tightly compressed into a finite space, then Brockwood is the antithesis. There's a combination of airy space, emptiness and beauty, both architectural and natural (an early 19th-century park planted with magnificent trees).

Not only is the centre spacious, and under-exploited, but it is set in a rather empty corner of the country. The triangle of Hampshire between Basingstoke, Winchester and Petersfield remains oddly underpopulated, partly because of the Black Death, which struck it especially lethally in the 14th century (or so I was told when I went to school around there), and partly because of its subsequent regrouping into vast aristocratic estates.

But the most remarkable



Anti-guru: J. Krishnamurti emphasised appreciation of current existence rather than a striving for fulfilment in the next life Corbis

thing about Brockwood is the way it is pervaded by the spirit of a truly extraordinary man. Many will know the bizarre story of J. Krishnamurti: how a poor South Indian boy was adopted by the Theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater and educated by them to become a new, global Messiah; and then how the young Krishnamurti dramatically disavowed these

messianic intentions, declared that "truth is a pathless land" and set out on his own six-decade-long pilgrimage as a philosophical and religious teacher or guiding light, though he insisted, like Socrates, that he was not really a teacher at all. He was, however, an educationalist, who founded half a dozen schools, which privilege the development of a rounded, ethical individual over the accumula-

tion of information and grades. One is housed near the centre in Brockwood Park.

Krishnamurti was an anti-guru. He was certainly very different from, and often scornful of, those gurus who demanded or attracted unquestioning devotion, and accumulated scores of Rolls-Royces, jewels or palaces. Those attracted to Krishnamurti have tended to be questioning types;

they have included, as well as some lost souls no doubt, writers, philosophers and scientists such as George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Iris Murdoch and David Bohm.

To spend time at Brockwood, for me, is also to spend time with Krishnamurti – an unfailingly bracing and chastening experience.

Krishnamurti had a kind of vogue (a word he would have hated) in the 1960s and 1970s but his thought, though profoundly anti-authoritarian, was far from the “let-it-all-hang-out” orthodoxy of those times. There is something wonderfully incongruous about the videotapes of Krishnamurti, with his immaculate Savile Row shirts and his P.G.Wodehouse English, speaking to young people in bandanas and kaftans.

At the time, many of those people probably thought Krishnamurti a bit old-fashioned (in some ways

he remained an Edwardian figure) and austere: he was no fan of over-indulgence in drink or drugs, though equally he saw no point in the convoluted self-denials of would-be religious people whose abnegations only fuelled their own repressed desires. Revisited 30 years on from the heyday of hippiedom, Krishnamurti seems a more radical thinker than those who promoted a rebellion that was still tied to the structures it kicked against.

As a man who lived through almost the whole of the murderous 20th century, and who was raised in the context of a religious sect, Krishnamurti was especially intolerant of sectarian religions and ideologies, and indeed of “belief”. He saw with great clarity how all such sects and ideologies create division, hatred and war. He would have deplored our current double standard, whereby a purported war against

fanatical “terror” is combined with a strange pandering to “religious” forces that suppress free speech and artistic expression. Religion for him was not a dogmatic adherence to rules and practices, but as “the

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gathering of all our energies, mental, spiritual, physical” into a flame of attention and compassion.

Krishnamurti was an environmentalist avant la lettre. Long before our current, belated recognition of ecological crisis, he saw how “we have destroyed the earth, polluted it, wiped out species. Killing animals has become an industry.” At

the Rishi Valley school in Andhra Pradesh, India (a marvellous place to visit if you have time), he undertook the planting of thousands of trees and created a bird sanctuary in what had been a near-desert.

What struck me most on my last visit to Brockwood, though, was Krishnamurti’s inspiring loftiness of purpose – his dedication to the truly good and beautiful and marvellous that can come about in the here and now, and need not be sought in the beyond. He wanted the centre to “last a thousand years, unpolluted, like a river that has the capacity to cleanse itself; which means no authority whatsoever for the inhabitants”. The opposite of a thousand-year Reich, that is; an eternal river that always flows and is always fresh.

harry.eyres@ft.com

## The Krishnamurti Centre

Brockwood Park  
Bramdean, Hampshire  
SO24 0LQ  
England

Tel: +44 (0) 1962 771 748

Fax: +44 (0) 1962 771 755

Email: [info@krishnamurticentre.org.uk](mailto:info@krishnamurticentre.org.uk)

Website: [www.krishnamurticentre.org.uk](http://www.krishnamurticentre.org.uk)