A weekend in . . .

Haworth, West Yorks

asked where the Bronte sisters were born, most people would probably say Haworth, the small Yorkshire town high in the Pennines near Bradford. It draws crowds of literary pilgrims and less literary tourists and has become the wuthering heart of "Bronte Country".

Haworth wasn't, however, where the sisters were born. They spent their early years six wind-blown miles away in the sturdy, no-nonsense village of Thornton where, with scarves and gloves packed, my wife and I are starting our weekend.

Their stone-built four-bedroom birthplace, on a cobbled side street, has had a chequered history, serving over the years as a butcher's shop and a restaurant. The locally formed Bronte Birthplace Trust has campaigned for it to be converted into a museum, but it has recently been bought by a couple who plan to open it as a coffee shop. In the meantime, it stands empty and rather forlorn-looking, with only a plaque and the nearby Bronte Parsonage Museum standing as reminders of the Brontes' literary importance.

We drive on — past Bronte Tyres, Bronte Private Hire and Bronte Business Park — to Haworth. On this damp and misty autumn evening it couldn't be more "atmospheric", in the way visitors always hope it's going to be.

Scout-ed-tooled, slate-tiled terraces climb the hillsides like steps, and the steep main street, with its cafes and pleasantly cluttered gift shops, its belted-braceries and well-stocked bookshops, has an out-of-town, out-of-season calm. There's hardly anyone about. At the top, the wet cobbles shine in the lamplight and cats scuttle across the path to the Bronte Parsonage Museum, which faces a gloomy entrance way and the forbidding moors the other.

We visit it the next day. The sisters spent most of their lives here and it's a treasure house of Brontes. There is the black horsehair sofa on which Emily died; here is Charlotte's white wedding bonnet — guests said she looked "like a little snowdrop"; here is Anne's collection of pebbles, gathered on the beach at Scarborough, the town where she died. Most compellingly, here is a display of the sisters' manuscripts, some in the finest handwriting, written in this very house.

Unfortunately, the Parsonage has been hijacked by a controversial "installation" by the artist and writer Charlotte Cory. It aims to create an alternative "museum within a museum" by scattering Bronte-inspired clutter among the regular exhibits. In a surreal homage to the Victorians' obsession with taxidermy, it superimposes animal and bird heads on portraits. There is also a small stuffed giraffe. The visitors' book suggests that not everyone is delighted: "Hit at this . . . ridiculous face . . . really dreadful and ugly . . . reaching the Bronte family . . . ruins the experience," Steve Sokol, visiting from Australia, sums it up: "If you were passionate about the Brontes, you would be desolated by this."

We walk on past the Parsonage to a path across the moors. The great tracts of tufted moorland haunted the sisters. The sun comes out to soften the bleakness and the stillness is almost complete. "It's so wild and beautiful," says Megan Moorhouse, a Bronte enthusiast from Los Angeles. "You just feel like you could be Cathy in Wuthering Heights."

If we can't walk on a couple of miles, we'd reach the ruins of Top Withens, the farm house that repeatedly inspired the Earnshaw family home in that novel. But a lone grouse cackles "Go back, go back," so we do.

In fact we go to Keighley, on a steam train run by the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway, a "heritage" line with steam-whistling whistles, brassing pistons and a carefully nurtured buffing-puffing-chuffing nostalgia. The journey takes about half an hour, down the wooded valley, past settlements, straggling dry stone walls, grazing horses, the Bronte Caravan Park and stations with old-timeliner advertising for "The Prince of the Food of the Gods". Clouds of engine steam plume past the windows and people talk about The Railway Children, famously filmed here. The middle-aged woman across the aisle, gazing out with her rail-enthusiast husband, is in a period costume a Forties-style woolen bonnet and a Sixties-style fur-collared coat. Or maybe she just old-fashioned. We have an hour or so in Keighley, once a thriving tattie town, before our train back. Time to stride out with an intriguing leaflet called Squire Kirkby in 45 Minutes. Its 50 invisibly invites enquiring comments, but it takes you on an interesting walk, pointing out the UK's first Carnegie library and the blue plaque on the birthplace of the poet and playwright Gordon Bottomley.

He died in 1948 and might be better remembered if he hadn't been so fond of such discouraging titles as The Gate of Starmargulis, The Riding to Lithwaite, Grasch, and Leaflet and Donat. He should have stuck to simple titles, such as Jane Eyre or Wuthering Heights.

Stephen McClure

Need to know

Stephen McClure was a guest of Welcome to Yorkshire (Yorkshire.com)

Where to stay

Park Top House (01756 203932, petra@parktophouse.co.uk) is a comfortable, quiet and outstandingly friendly four-bedroom&B&B handily situated at the bottom of Haworth's main street, five minutes' walk from the railway station. Its five views over the valley, excellent breakfasts and, a thoughtful touch, hot water bottles in the bedrooms. B&B doubles cost from £65. For something a little grander, Ashmount Country House (01274 645728, ashmounthouse.co.uk), near the town centre, has eight bedrooms in a grand Victorian villa full of antiques and chandeliers and four suites in houses across the road, with white-painted beds and hot tubs. B&B doubles cost from £99 to £125.

Where to eat

Pack a good appetite if you're eating in Haworth: the portions are challengingly hearty. The Parsonage Inn (01535 642717, flasson@haworth.co.uk), a convivial pub on the main street, with thriving domino sessions, charges £9 for most main courses, which include wholesome pies, pasta and steaks. Haworth Old Hall (01535 642922, haworth.oldhall.co.uk), once a spacious 17th-century house, now a popular pub and restaurant, has a broad menu including tasty haddock and leek, bangers and mash, potato and chive pie curry (£5).

Further information

Haworth's Visitor Information Centre (01535 642398) stocks an outstanding free English Heritage booklet about the town's history and architecture.