



Get away for... THE WEEKEND!

Stunning countryside, magnificent wildlife, historical buildings and ruins, and traditional seashores, friendly Suffolk has it all

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

Picturesque buildings and rugged windswept beaches are what tempted me to make the long journey from our Lancashire home to Suffolk. Arriving from the northwest, we pulled into the upmarket town of Bury St Edmunds that grew around a wealthy Benedictine monastery.

Like many monasteries, the roof and exterior stones of the abbey were removed after its dissolution and, today, romantic weathered remains trace the shape of the monastic buildings. Wandering around the park and ruins, we agreed this was a promising introduction to Suffolk.

After visiting the light and airy interior of the cathedral, we circled the handsome building. In a peaceful green, facing further abbey ruins, we stumbled upon a striking statue of Edmund by renowned sculptor, Elisabeth Frink. Edmund was King of East Anglia, a martyr and saint. Noticing a wolf

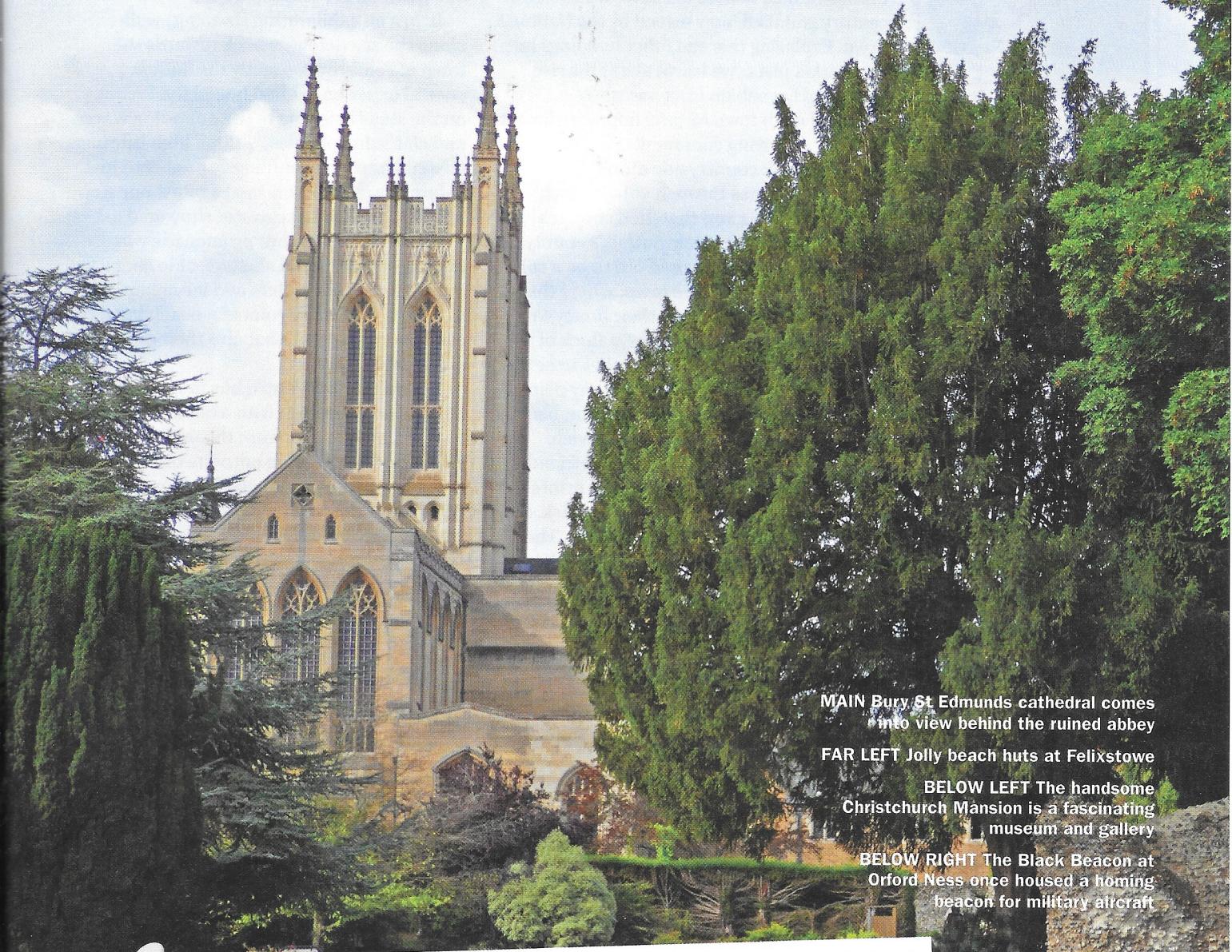
statue lurked behind the figure, I asked a helpful woman in the tourist office its significance. She retold the somewhat gory tale of the wolf that protected Edmund's head until it was found, after he was decapitated by Vikings for his faith.

We mulled this tale over with coffee and delicious shortbread in the sunny square overlooking the unique Pillar of Salt. This unusual modernist road sign from the 1930s boasts being England's first internally illuminated road sign. Beyond the sign loomed the ornate and defensive abbey gate that would have impressed medieval visitors.

In the charming twelfth century Moyse's Hall we lingered with a collection of clocks of all shapes and sizes. Admiring the intricate details, I was enjoying the soothing ticking of so many timepieces until the calm was shattered with mechanical whirring and bells as they all chimed the hour! ▶



Why?... To explore a fascinating town that values its history while looking forwards

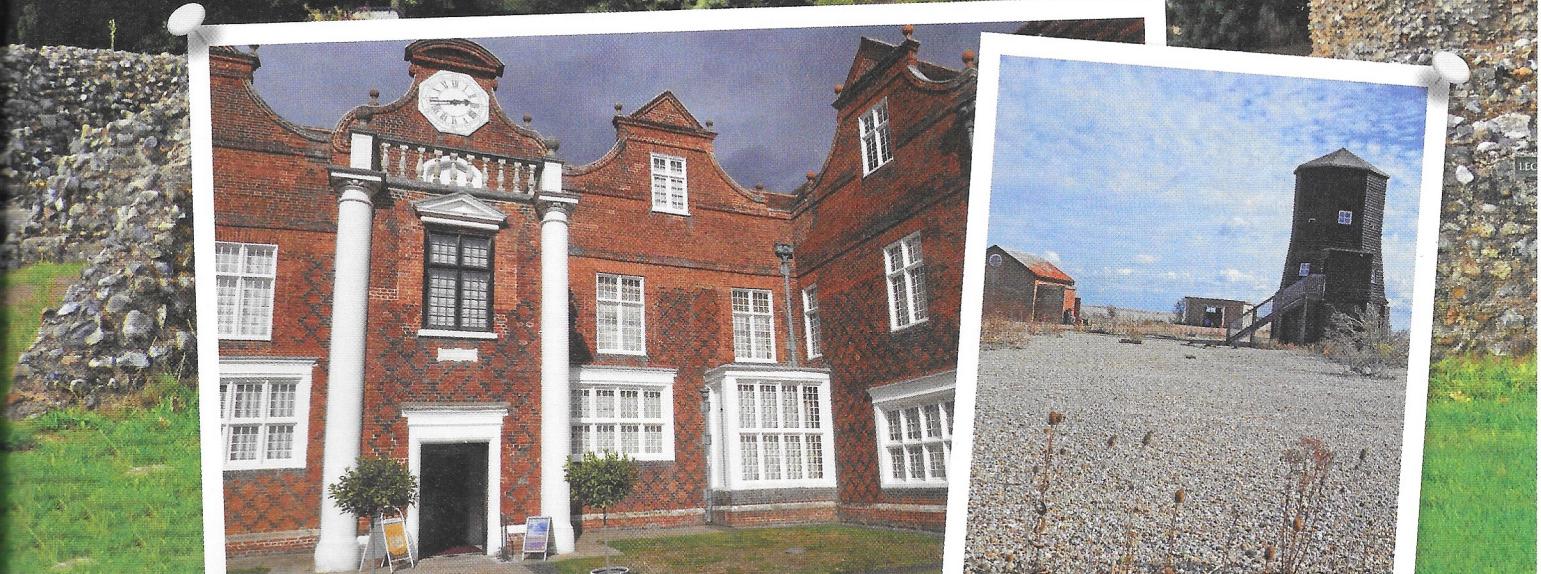


MAIN Bury St Edmunds cathedral comes into view behind the ruined abbey

FAR LEFT Jolly beach huts at Felixstowe

BELOW LEFT The handsome Christchurch Mansion is a fascinating museum and gallery

BELOW RIGHT The Black Beacon at Orford Ness once housed a homing beacon for military aircraft



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, explore beautiful places in their Blue Bus whatever the season. Carol is a keen walker, fair-weather cyclist and improving birdwatcher



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the Blue Bus

TOP TIPS

Bury St Edmunds Ram Meadow car park has dedicated motorhome parking (five spaces) in a separate section without height barriers, and is just 10-15 minutes' walk from the abbey and cathedral what3words: attends.forwarded.foods

There is parking in Orford and the National Trust ferry to Orford Ness takes just 12 passengers, so it is important to prebook a timed boat online. National Trust members pay the ferry fare only, while non-members pay an entrance fee, too

nationaltrust.org.uk

RIGHT The marina at Ipswich waterfront

It was a short drive to the historic town of Lavenham and its feast of photogenic buildings that were perfect for sauntering around. Streets of lopsided and colourful timber-framed houses led us to the sixteenth century guildhall, now owned by the National Trust. Exploring this and other buildings in the market place, we learnt about the rise and fall of Lavenham from a wealthy medieval cloth town to rural impoverishment and now a thriving community.

The Suffolk countryside didn't disappoint. Lanes through villages with delightful greens and thatched cottages took us towards Ipswich, Suffolk's county town. Our campsite turned out to be a rural haven on the edge of the town, where the owners have bees and sell their honey to guests. Set among apple trees, a flock of great tits flitted around the bushes near the Blue Bus, finding seeds on the many plants.

A 15-minute walk to Bramford enabled us to catch the irregular bus into Ipswich. Buying our tickets, the helpful and friendly driver apologised that they hadn't printed clearly. "It'll be me driving the bus back, so it won't be a problem," he assured us. The driver knew every passenger and, studying the apparently random bus times, we realised they were organised so he could operate a one-driver service.

From Ipswich another bus took us to Felixstowe and the end of line at Landguard Fort on the mouth of the River Orwell.

Facing Harwich Harbour, this was once an important defensive position, but while the large eighteenth century fort is impressive, it is dwarfed by the huge container ships and gantries of Felixstowe Port.

It was an exhilarating (bracing) walk along the sea defences back towards the town of Felixstowe, exactly the Suffolk coastal experience I had hoped for. We sat on the steps listening to the pounding waves and clattering pebbles. "I think high tide has passed," Anthony confidently predicted just before a large wave crashed against our step and we shrieked as seawater showered us!

Felixstowe's pleasant promenade was lined with traditional shelters, chip shops, bucket and spade sellers and ice cream cafés. We tootled by colourful beach huts, each one individual, that give their owners an enviable sea view.

Waiting for our return bus in Ipswich, we fell into conversation with a chatty local who remembered us from the morning bus! The next day, climbing onto the bus to Ipswich again, we were greeted like old friends by the same (and only) driver and were by now on nodding acquaintance with other passengers. If we had stayed much longer we would be part of the community!

The River Orwell winds from the sea at Felixstowe into Ipswich where trade and commerce have flourished since the Anglo-Saxons. By the eighteenth century, shipbuilding was also booming.



Today, the waterfront has been redeveloped and a marina lined with chic bars and cafés cleverly combines old and new. Vibrant street art and the warehouse-chic of rusty paint-flecked columns contrasts with gleaming modern buildings.

The Old Custom House, with a stately frontage, is the oldest building remaining, dating from when the port was expanding and wool from Lavenham, and other Suffolk towns, was exported from these quays. We enjoyed the sunshine outside the contemporary university buildings, watching students practising filming and walked by the parade of shiny boats.

Spotting a vegan restaurant, we realised it was lunchtime and grabbed an inside window seat. We made a fortuitous choice; the food was fresh and delicious and the welcome warm.

Ipswich's town centre bustled with shoppers. I looked above the shopfronts for elaborate buildings that told the story of changing times. The former Croydons jewellers with well-proportioned oriel windows and a painting of Old Father Time was particularly magnificent.

We stumbled upon a quirky bronze statue of the Giles family, a popular cartoon drawn by Ipswich-based illustrator, Carl Giles, in the twentieth century. Known locally as *The Grandma Statue*, it features Grandma Giles looking up to the studio window where Carl worked and, walking around the figure, we

identified other characters from the cartoons.

Christchurch Mansion is a fine fifteenth century Tudor manor house and museum that exhibits paintings from Suffolk artists. From the Great Hall, with an outstanding black and white marble chequered floor, we headed first to the gallery. Two of Britain's best-known artists, Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable, were born in Suffolk, and Christchurch Mansion has an exceptional collection of their work.

Gainsborough lived in Ipswich in the eighteenth century and earned money painting portraits as well as landscapes. I learnt how Constable was influenced by Gainsborough and that he painted more than his most famous work, *The Hay Wain*.

We could have also visited the Ipswich Museum to discover more about the town's history (*Ed: currently closed until 2025*). Instead, we took advantage of the good weather and sat in the square facing the ornate town hall watching fountains dancing to the music of a busking accordion player – we could have been in France!

Ipswich is proud of its Anglo-Saxon and maritime history, but it would be fair to say it isn't wall-to-wall touristy and we appreciated exploring a real city rather than a showpiece. It has attractive and historic buildings and other corners that are ordinary and occasionally tired, but everywhere the people were exceptionally welcoming and friendly. ▶

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

September

HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 35mpg	£160
700 miles	£160
Site fees	£60
Entrance fees Moyse's Hall Museum and Orford Ness	£34
TOTAL	£254



BELOW LEFT England's first illuminated road sign

BELOW RIGHT The seafront and beach in Felixstowe

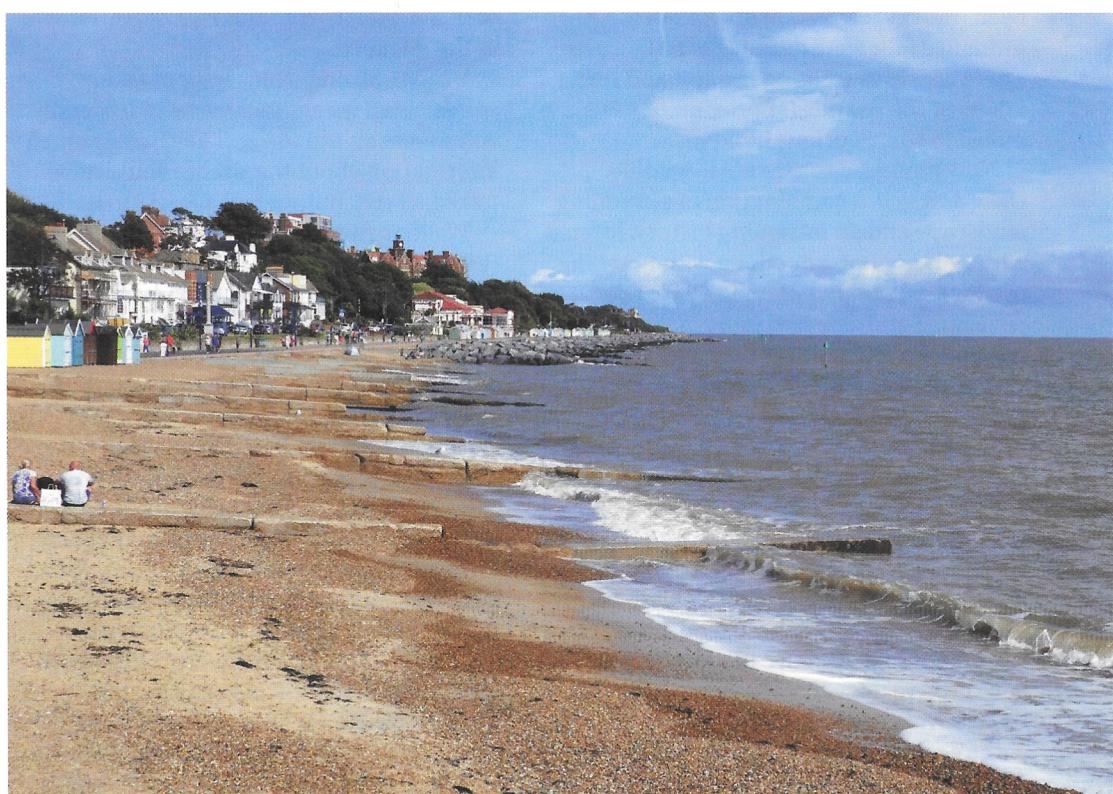
INFORMATION

Planning bus travel on all services around Ipswich
 suffolkonboard.com

Discover Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich
 ipswich.cimuseums.org.uk

Moyse's Hall museum in Bury St Edmunds
 moyshall.org

Information about Bury St Edmunds
 visit-burystedmunds.co.uk





Must see... The charming and colourful timber-framed houses of nearby Lavenham



We drove to Orford in the early morning to catch the first ferry to Orford Ness, a wild and remote shingle spit. Our seemingly magical boat trip transported us from a quaint Suffolk village to a post-apocalyptic ex-military landscape.

Since the 1990s, Orford Ness has been in the hands of the National Trust, after it had been (mostly) cleared of unexploded ordnance following decades of military use. There are three trails on the spit and we followed the red one (approximately five miles) to some curious buildings.

Now managed to maximise wildlife, Orford Ness is a combination of a stunning landscape and an intriguing history, littered with military flotsam. Along with bombing practice, all manner of military kit was developed and assessed here, including radar and nuclear missile casings.

Our first stop was the comprehensive exhibition inside the old NAAFI. This provided information about the site, from early military aviation development to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) work during the Cold War. This latter activity took place in the collection of half-buried concrete structures. Two of these are nicknamed the 'pagodas' and are ominous and distinctive landmarks that have little to do with garden furniture.

As advised, we carefully stuck to the paths across the sculpted waves of shingle dotted with hardy plants, rusty metal shapes

and strange half-ruined buildings, all under a vast sky. If this wasn't surreal enough, on the horizon Chinese water deer bounded across the pebbles.

We rested watching wading birds scurrying around and probing for food, before climbing to the roof of the Bomb Ballistics Building, which gave 360° views over the shingle with the Port of Felixstowe in the distance.

Despite strong winds whipping our words away, we chatted to the two friendly volunteers on the tower. They had so much information about the site we could have talked all day, but we had a ferry to catch!

Walking further, we peered inside one of the AWRE laboratories. Sunshine poured through the missing roof and water filled a trench surrounded by flourishing greenery and for a moment I thought I had stumbled upon an overgrown ornamental pond!

On the return ferry I felt that I was leaving a different dimension, which left me somewhat bewildered. Our helmswoman asked what we thought of Orford Ness. I could only mumble something inadequate; I was still trying to understand everything I had seen. As we drove back through pretty Suffolk villages, pointing out thatched cottages and picture-postcard churches to each other, I was still considering the extreme bleakness of the coast at Orford Ness, which had provided an unforgettable ending to our time around Ipswich. **mmm**

ABOVE LEFT The beautiful Guildhall in Lavenham

ABOVE RIGHT Sauntering around Lavenham, you find hundreds of charming houses

THE CAMP SITE

Little Sage Hill CS at Copenhagen Cottage, Tye Lane, Bramford, near Ipswich IP8 4NP

07974 937412

campingandcaravanning club.co.uk

1 March - 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20

ALTERNATIVE SITE

PREMIER Run Cottage
PARK 2023
Hollesley, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3RQ

01394 411309

runcottage.co.uk

All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £26