

Words & pictures ■ Carol Kubicki

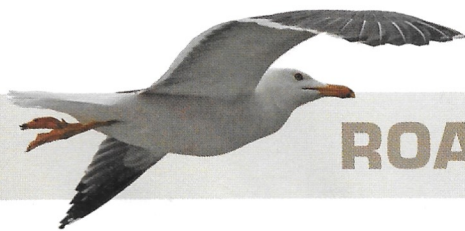
Shifting shingle, soft sands and crumbling cliffs in East Anglia. Using two 1940s guidebooks, Carol and Anthony explore Suffolk and Norfolk in their Blue Bus



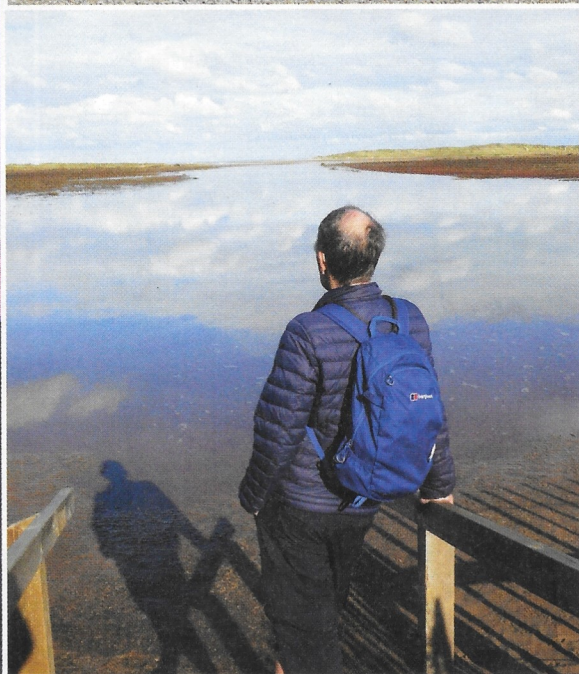
In the 1940s it was apparently OK for travel writers to be tactless and even rude. A friend had gifted me a pile of shabby Penguin guidebooks, whose yellowing pages were peppered with ticks and stars made by her relatives. These books revealed a different England, when driving tours were a novel idea. Browsing the two guides for East Anglia to plan our own campervan trip, I squirmed as I read the writer's forthright introduction, "Suffolk folk will be found to be slow but extremely thorough, very

hospitable and in the rural parts more ready to accept the stranger than their Norfolk neighbours."

Driving into Bury St Edmunds, I read aloud from our 1949 companion that this was "undoubtedly one of the most historic places in East Anglia." After reversing the Blue Bus into a dedicated motorhome bay, I was keen to see what had changed in the last 70-plus years but first had to pay. Struggling with the stropky parking payment machine, I fantasised about the days before such contraptions



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existed and I took so long paying, Anthony had kicked off his shoes and was reading a magazine when I returned to the 'van!

The Suffolk guidebook dutifully directed us to the historic treats of the town. The flint-rubble abbey ruins and the 'two very fine gateways' are still here and are superb. Without the impertinent writer's guidance we might have skipped the charming medieval Moyse's Hall museum and then missed the Lego exhibition. While I admired the intricate model of Westminster Abbey, Anthony watched famous film clips cleverly reimagined in Lego. Among others he recognised *Titanic*, *ET* and *Singing in the Rain*.

The campsite owners near Ipswich were certainly hospitable and the Blue Bus pitched happily among apple trees and fragrant herbs while we explored Suffolk's county town.

TOP LEFT

Wells-next-the-Sea's picturesque [and expensive] beach huts at sunset

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

The wide shingle beach at Thorpeness

A grey seal pup cools off in the waves

Looking out to sea at Holkham Beach

LEFT

Colourful street art on Ipswich's Waterfront



Ipswich sits on the River Orwell and the waterfront has been transformed since the 1940s, from a working dock to a lively area of bars and cafés. Our guidebook steered us across town to Christchurch Mansion, which we read "stands in Christchurch Park, a park in the best sense," whatever that means. Gardens still surround this magnificent Tudor building and it remains a free and engaging museum.

"... At the time of writing [Orford Ness] is still reserved for military training," we were warned. Fortunately, this has changed since 1949, and today most of the unexploded ordnance has been cleared and Orford Ness is accessible by ferry. All manner of military kit was developed and tested here and under a big sky we walked through a surreal expanse of vegetated shingle, dotted with rusty metal shapes and strange half-ruined buildings.

It is a meandering but worthwhile drive to the RSPB's Minsmere reserve. The guidebook led us to expect Suffolk's sandiest beach and unexploded bombs! Today the beach is shingle but safe and, after visiting some of the wetland hides, we set off along the coast, stopping to watch a grey seal pup stretched out on the tideline and minded by a warden.

Climbing onto the cliffs and sandy heath we walked to Dunwich, once a bustling medieval port. Storms in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries washed away large areas of this coast and we were cautioned not to be "too disappointed with what (we) find remaining of a once-famous city and seaport."

From our campsite at Sizewell (described as bleak in the 1940s and this was before the nuclear power station!), more coastal walking took us to Thorpeness and Aldeburgh.



i FIND OUT MORE

Electric Eel boat trip
W broads-authority.gov.uk

A comprehensive guide to the Suffolk coast
W thesuffolkcoast.co.uk

A good start to finding things to do in Norfolk
W visitnorfolk.co.uk

The RSPB has a number of reserves in Suffolk and Norfolk
W rspb.org.uk

Not much seemed to have changed in Thorpeness and it remains a picture-perfect image of Merrie England, with mock-Tudor houses and duck ponds. A more recent addition to the beach near Aldeburgh is a large scallop sculpture commemorating composer and former resident, Benjamin Britten. Generously, the sculpture is both seat and shelter and children joyfully scrambled onto the shell and made dens underneath.

Walking by the colourful houses of Aldeburgh, we sought shelter from the breeze near the impressive quatrefoil-shaped Martello tower. Returning to Sizewell, an inland

route took us through allotments and a nature reserve where trees arched over sandy paths and blackberries glistened on prickly bushes.

Later, in Thorpeness we enjoyed a glass of local beer looking over the picturesque village; take away the cars and we could easily have been in the 1940s!

The Penguin guidebooks list more churches than you could ever visit, but I thought Blythburgh Church sounded worth a detour. If anything, the book understated what a lovely medieval church this is. After admiring the handsome flint exterior, I stepped inside onto the wonky tiled floor that, if it could talk, would have told a wealth of stories. The medieval font and wooden carved pew ends are magnificent but it is the painted wooden ceiling with angels, their wings outstretched in flight, that are the highlight.

Parking in sunny Southwold, we wandered between the colourful beach huts and the sand while surfers paddled towards breaking waves. Each hut is unique and I was pleased to see one celebrating Morecambe and Wise, giving a nod to our hometown. Peering into the seaside-themed interior of another, it looked

almost as cosy as a campervan! The Penguin guide describes Southwold as “a sedate little seaside town –

somewhat war-battered” and this is still half-true!

Catching the aroma from Adnams, I remembered reading that, even in 1949, a brewery produced “a more-or-less old-fashioned kind of ale” and we supped delicious local beer in a sheltered and sunny pub garden.

Great Yarmouth “is sometimes called the Venice of East Anglia. It has also been likened to Blackpool”, our guidebook companion asserted. As we munched fresh donuts on the seafront the vibe was definitely more Blackpool than Venice. We found the piece by street artist, Banksy, that delightfully shows a couple seemingly dancing on the roof of a bus shelter as an accordionist plays.

Merrivale Model Village only dates back to 1961 but is packed with nostalgia. I loved peering into model houses, railway stations and even its own miniature Banksy, and was only disappointed there was no campsite with tiny campervans.



TOP LEFT

Halfway House on Blakeney Point is a desolate spot

CENTRE TOP

An electric boat trip on the Broads

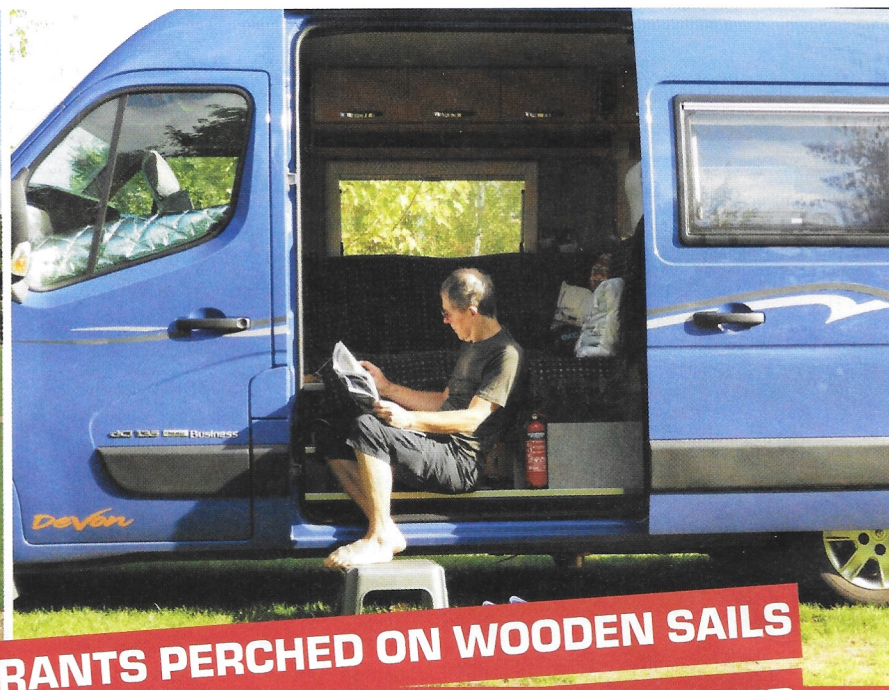
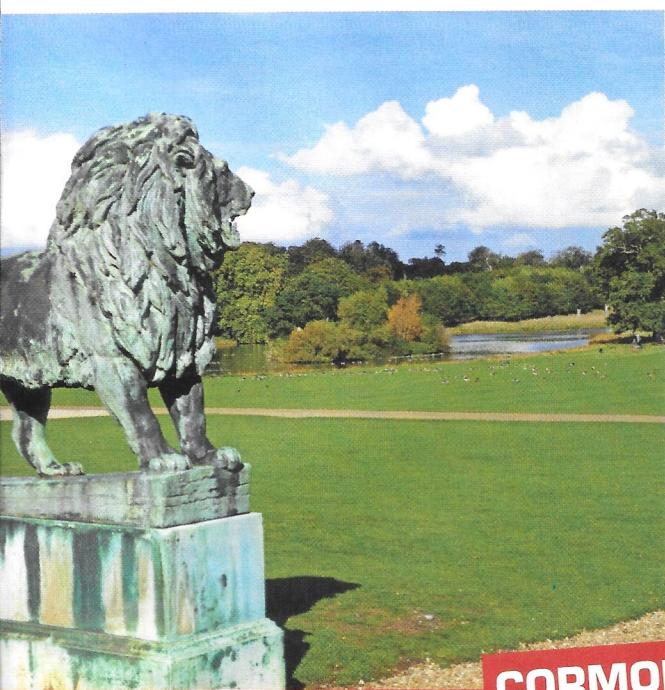
CENTRE BOTTOM

Merrivale Model Village in Great Yarmouth even had a model Banksy

INSET

The lighthouse in the traditional seaside resort of Southwold

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CORMORANTS PERCHED ON WOODEN SAILS CATCHING THE WEAK AUTUMN SUN AND RAINBOWS BRIGHTENED UP THE SKY

The Norfolk guidebook promised we would be delighted by the unique inland waterways of the Norfolk Broads. Certainly best experienced from a boat, we walked along the dykes, only catching tantalising glimpses of rivers through the vegetation. An electric boat trip sounded like a low-impact way to see more. From our campsite, a path along the River Ant took us by an old windmill where cormorants perched on wooden sails catching the weak autumn sun and rainbows brightened up the sky after the showers. We arrived at Toad Hole Cottage in good time and shared our flask of coffee watching a woman polishing an elegant wooden wherry.

The *Electric Eel* is small enough to navigate the narrow channels where the reeds nudged up against the boat. The dense greenery muffled the river traffic noises and our trip was straight out of *Swallows and Amazons*. At a bird hide we spotted a marsh harrier and our helmsman gave an insight into reed management and



ABOVE LEFT

Holkham Hall is perfect for a stroll

ABOVE RIGHT

Relaxing at our rural campsite near Ipswich

INSET

Aldeburgh has lots of character

thatching. Later we picnicked in a hide on the nature trail and a kingfisher flew by.

We walked back via the unusual ruins of St Benet's Abbey; when the abbey fell out of use a brick windmill was built inside the gatehouse.

I liked the seaside resort of Cromer in north Norfolk. The guidebook doesn't mention the pier, which post-war would have been in disrepair, but does promise an "excellent beach". Below the buildings that crowd the cliffs for a sea view and beyond the last of the beach huts we found the Banksy, *Luxury Rentals Only*. Painted on the sea wall, this fleeting art work is unprotected and beginning to fade. Walking back along the sands I used the steps that dripped with black seaweed to negotiate the tall wooden groynes, stopping to look at tiny pebbles lodged ornamentally along the slats.

Realising we were camping underneath Norfolk's highest point,

Beacon Hill, we had to include the 103m-high point in a walk. Our varied route passed charming pebble-built houses, climbed a sunken path through a dark, dark wood and, from the summit, crossed a heath of gorse and heather. Skirting the fields of a horse sanctuary, we stopped to watch the animals, from cute Shetland ponies to long-legged racehorses. At the gardens by Sheringham's ruined priory, we conquered the maze.

After sharing our picnic lunch with a flock of adorable turnstones on Sheringham's seafront, we headed along a stretch of coast that was beautiful and fascinating. Attempts have been made to protect the soft cliffs from the sea and the futile remains of wooden revetments (running parallel to the sea) stretched along the coast. The intricate grainy patterns on the weathered wood and the colours from coral-red to washed-out grey were striking. The revetments had

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been constructed with large nails and these remained as rusty-orange spikes. We used the wooden bars as an outdoor gym and walked hesitantly up to the cliffs to feel their crumbliness.

Our guidebook notes that Blakeney Point was given to the National Trust in 1912 and states unenthusiastically, "if you are

interested in bird life you can visit." Heavy showers were followed by rainbows as we parked at Cley Beach. Putting on waterproofs for the walk, I realised I had somehow interrupted the normal function of my back. Battling through the deep shifting shingle and a headwind didn't help the pain and I found easier going on the sand alongside the crashing waves. Seals bobbed in the sea and a group of Brent geese flew over; we picked up some litter and admired pretty shells. Resting at the remote old Watch House looking over the salt marshes we decided to bail out, head back and enjoy the tailwind.

There is something special about waking to the joyful honking of geese as they fly over our campervan. My back was still painful as I struggled to put my shoes and socks on but painkillers and light walking eased it. We made our way to Holkham Hall



and wandered through the parkland of this eighteenth century house, something you could only do on summer Wednesdays in 1949. The guide fancifully declares that the "...sandy waste, where two rabbits fought for one blade of grass," was transformed into the productive Holkham Estate.

Tracks took us to Wells-next-the-Sea where we read, "...you will find no piers or funfairs..." but "if you are in search of 'local colour' drop in at the Shipwrights Arms one evening." Unfortunately, this pub is now closed, so we looked for local colour in Wells' quaint corners and lively main street that had an eclectic mixture of shops, from seaside gifts to bakers and hardware. We ate ice cream sitting by the harbour before following the muddy channel full of wading birds towards the beach.

Our final day in Norfolk began with blue sky and sunshine at the RSPB reserve at Titchwell. We spent an idyllic hour here walking by the pools to the dunes and sandy beach. The blue sea met the blue sky at the horizon and the space felt infinite. This is Norfolk at its best.

By the time we reached Castle Rising it was shrouded in mist, cloaking the views and making this stunning castle even more atmospheric. Crossing the immense ditch, we entered through the gatehouse in the high earth bank. Climbing the impressive set of stone steps in the well-preserved keep, we stopped to admire the ornate Norman doorway that had survived the centuries.

Leaving East Anglia, we had a long drive back to Lancashire. My back protested by seizing up after sitting for more than 30 minutes and being able to break the journey at the home of some Derbyshire friends was a relief. They offered sympathy and prescribed the perfect remedy of good wine and laughter to finish our holiday.



STAY AT



COPENHAGEN COTTAGE CAMPING AND CARAVANNING CLUB CERTIFICATED SITE

Tye Lane, Bramford, Ipswich,
Suffolk IP8 4NP
T 01473 463765
W campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

BEACH VIEW HOLIDAY PARK

Sizewell Common, Sizewell, Leiston,
Suffolk IP16 4TU
T 01728 830724
W beachviewholidaypark.co.uk

WHITE HOUSE BEACH CARAVAN AND MOTORHOME CLUB SITE

Beach Road, Kessingland,
Lowestoft, Suffolk NR33 7RW
T 01502 740278
W caravanclub.co.uk

NORFOLK BROADS CARAVAN AND MOTORHOME CLUB SITE

Johnson Street, Ludham, Great
Yarmouth, Norfolk NR29 5NY
T 01692 630357
W caravanclub.co.uk

SEACROFT CARAVAN AND MOTORHOME CLUB SITE

Cromer Road, East Runton, Cromer,
Norfolk NR27 9NH
T 01263 514938
W caravanclub.co.uk

PINEWOODS HOLIDAY PARK

Beach Road, Wells-next-the-Sea,
Norfolk NR23 1DR
T 01328 710439
W pinewoods.co.uk

BELOW

Windmills and boats on the Norfolk Broads

INSET

Near Sheringham we found a special stretch of beach

