

# WALKING IN NORFOLK



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Originally from the West Midlands, Laurence Mitchell has lived in Norfolk for longer than he cares to remember. With a degree in Environmental Science, he worked as a geography teacher for many years before taking up travel writing and photography full-time a decade or so ago. Never one to follow the crowd, Laurence is especially interested in off-the-beaten-track destinations like the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus region, and has written guidebooks to Serbia, Belgrade and Kyrgyzstan, as well as *Slow Travel Norfolk* and *Slow Travel Suffolk*, for Bradt Travel Guides. When not venturing off to exotic destinations abroad he likes to explore his own backyard of Norfolk and Suffolk, a region he enjoys just as much as anywhere else.

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## WALKING IN NORFOLK

by Laurence Mitchell

**CICERONE**

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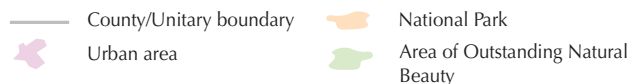
### Route symbols on OS map extracts

(for OS legend see printed OS maps)



OS map extracts reproduced at 1:40,000 (2.5cm to 1km)

### Features on the overview map



Front cover: A sunny ride in Thetford Forest (Walk 31)

## CONTENTS

Map key . . . . .	4
Overview map . . . . .	7

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> . . . . .	9
A brief history . . . . .	11
Landscapes . . . . .	14
Wildlife . . . . .	18
National Parks and AONBs . . . . .	19
Getting there and back . . . . .	20
When to go . . . . .	22
What to take . . . . .	22
Food and drink . . . . .	23
Waymarks and access . . . . .	23
Safety . . . . .	23
Maps . . . . .	23
Using this guide . . . . .	24
Longer walks in Norfolk . . . . .	25

<b>1 NORTHEAST COAST AND THE BROADS</b> . . . . .	26
Walk 1 Winterton-on-Sea . . . . .	27
Walk 2 Potter Heigham and Hickling Broad . . . . .	31
Walk 3 North Walsham . . . . .	35
Walk 4 Happisburgh . . . . .	39
Walk 5 Horstead and River Bure . . . . .	42

<b>2 SOUTH NORFOLK, THE YARE AND WAVENEY</b> . . . . .	46
Walk 6 River Chet and Hardley Marshes . . . . .	47
Walk 7 Outney Common and Earsham . . . . .	50
Walk 8 Rockland St Mary and Claxton . . . . .	54
Walk 9 Surlingham . . . . .	58
Walk 10 Burgh St Peter and 'The Triangle' . . . . .	62
Walk 11 Burgh Castle . . . . .	66
Walk 12 Shotesham . . . . .	70
Walk 13 Fritton Common . . . . .	73
Walk 14 Harleston and Redenhall . . . . .	76
Walk 15 Cringleford and River Yare . . . . .	80
Walk 16 New and Old Buckenham . . . . .	84

<b>3 NORTH NORFOLK AND COAST</b> .....	88
Walk 17 Sheringham and Beeston Regis .....	89
Walk 18 Bodham and Baconsthorpe .....	94
Walk 19 Itteringham .....	98
Walk 20 Aylsham and Blickling .....	101
Walk 21 Old Hunstanton, Thornham and Holme-next-the-Sea .....	105
Walk 22 Snettisham .....	111
Walk 23 Salthouse and Cley-next-the-Sea .....	115
Walk 24 Blakeney and Wiveton Downs .....	120
Walk 25 Little Walsingham, Houghton St Giles and Great Snoring .....	124
Walk 26 Brancaster Staithe and Barrow Common .....	129
<b>4 CENTRAL NORFOLK AND BRECKLAND</b> .....	133
Walk 27 Thompson Common and Pingo Trail .....	134
Walk 28 Swannington and Upgate Common .....	138
Walk 29 Hockering .....	141
Walk 30 Shipdham .....	145
Walk 31 Santon Warren and Thetford Forest .....	148
<b>5 WEST NORFOLK AND FENS</b> .....	153
Walk 32 Harpley and Peddars Way .....	154
Walk 33 Tittleshall and Godwick .....	158
Walk 34 Helhoughton and West Raynham .....	163
Walk 35 Castle Acre .....	167
Walk 36 Roydon and Roydon Common .....	171
Walk 37 Narborough and Nar Valley .....	174
Walk 38 Beachamwell .....	179
Walk 39 Hilgay Fen .....	184
Walk 40 The Wiggenhalls .....	187
<b>Appendix A</b> Route summary table .....	191
<b>Appendix B</b> Useful contacts .....	195
<b>Appendix C</b> Further reading .....	198
<b>Appendix D</b> Long distance walks in Norfolk .....	199

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Round tower church, commonly found in Norfolk,  
at Burgh Castle near Great Yarmouth (Walk 11)



## INTRODUCTION

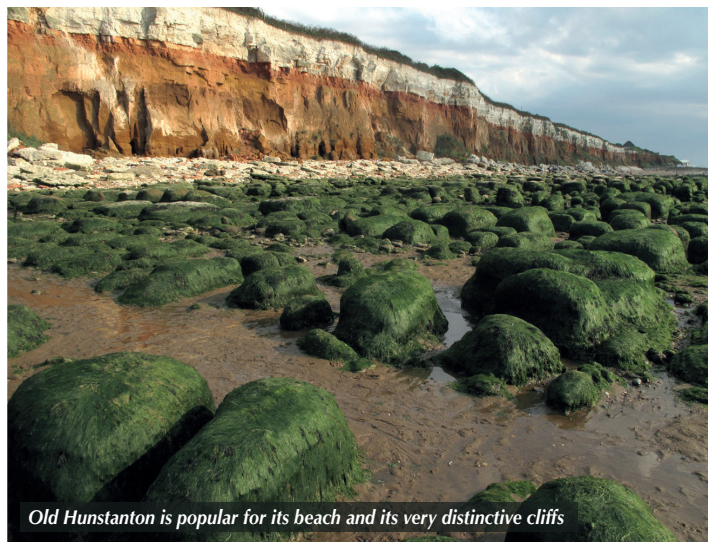


A rich harvest – straw bales in the fields just outside North Walsham (Walk 3)

'Very flat, Norfolk', asserts Amanda in Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, reflecting pretty much the commonly held view of the county: a place, with attitude perhaps (think of its heroes – Horatio Nelson, Thomas Paine, Delia Smith, Stephen Fry...Alan Partridge), but certainly not with altitude. The stereotyped view, although misleading, is understandable enough, as most people have some sort of image of Norfolk even if they have never visited the county. Many will have seen the vast sandy expanse of North Norfolk's Holkham Beach in films like *Shakespeare in Love* or TV programmes like Stephen Fry's *Kingdom*. Many more will think of boating holidays on the Norfolk Broads, or

make associations with the low-lying Fenland region of the far west of the county: aspects of Norfolk, certainly, but not the full picture by any means.

While it is undeniable that the Fenland region of the county's far west is flat and low-lying, as are the marshes and waterways of the Broads in the east, between these two extremes there is a great deal of topography going on. The fact is, Norfolk is far more varied than most outsiders imagine, with several distinct types of landscape, some of which are unique to the county. In addition to the shimmering water-world of the Broads, and the black soil and arrow-straight channels of the Fens (actually, just a small fraction of the county's landscape),



*Old Hunstanton is popular for its beach and its very distinctive cliffs*

Norfolk also has the sandy Brecks, rolling pastoral farmland, ancient woodland, meandering rivers and, the jewel in the crown, the gorgeous North Norfolk coast with its beaches, shingle banks, salt marshes and tidal mud flats. There are few other counties in southern England – or anywhere in the United Kingdom for that matter – that have quite as much sheer variety within their boundaries.

Of course, topography is not the be-all and end-all of a landscape's beauty. As any fan of the Fens will tell you, what the landscape lacks in elevation it makes up for with enormous skies and cloud formations of Himalayan proportions. Indeed, I have been told – quite seriously – by a

native Norfolk acquaintance that 'The trouble with mountains is that they get in the way of the view'. Although I do not subscribe to that view myself, after decades living in East Anglia I have at least come round to thinking that even the most diffidently undulating landscapes have plenty to offer in their own right.

The joy of walking in Norfolk is to experience this variety of landscapes in the raw – to follow the course of a river upstream, to walk along ancient footpaths, to stumble upon pristine tracts of woodland that have been around since the last Ice Age and villages that were thriving at the time of the Domesday Book, before the Norman invasion dramatically

changed the look of the countryside. It is also to smell and taste it – the tang of salt air in the coastal marshes, the fecund smell of wet vegetation in the Broads, the pungent aroma of wild garlic in ancient woodland in spring and, maybe less romantically, the occasional whiff of cattle slurry and freshly hosed farmyards. It is to experience wildlife too: the seeking out of Norfolk specialities and, more exciting still, chance encounters – sluggish grey seals on winter beaches on the North Norfolk coast, the deep boom of a bittern hidden in reedbeds, the spectacle of flocks of uncountable waders at the Wash, dragonflies and swallowtails in the Broads in summer; even the all-too-common experience of pheasants exploding from the undergrowth while crossing arable land. Perhaps more than anything, though, it is a sense of history, of change through time.

Any walk in Norfolk is a walk through history. Although the county might have become a backwater by the 19th century, in medieval times Norfolk was one of the most densely populated counties in England. Now it is among the least crowded. Unlike much of England, the Industrial Revolution never really took off in East Anglia as the region did not have the raw materials or power sources necessary for manufacture and so it was largely bypassed by the sudden and dramatic urban changes that took place throughout the North and Midlands. Norfolk's economic

revolution, if it could be called that, was earlier: between the 13th and 17th centuries when much of the land was given over to large flocks of sheep for the thriving international wool trade, and the county (or rather the county's landowners) grew wealthy on the profits. The wealth can still be seen today in lavishly decorated parish churches that seem to be disproportionately large for the small villages they service.

Despite its relative proximity to London, Norfolk still has a slightly isolated, 'end of the road' feel about it. Much of the county is, quite literally, at the end of the road as it does not lie on the route to anywhere else – if you have come to Norfolk, you have made a decision to come here and are not merely passing through. The fact that Norfolk is among the few counties in England that does not have a motorway going to it is something to be celebrated by those who prefer a quieter life. That is not to say that the county is backwards or insular as some might suggest, just that it has different priorities than simply getting somewhere as quickly as possible.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY

In 2010, the discovery of a haul of flint tools on a northeast Norfolk beach near Happisburgh pushed back the date of the first known human occupation of Britain by a quarter of a million years. The tools, which were estimated to be around 900,000 years old – the oldest



Gariannonum Roman Fort, Burgh Castle (Walk 11)

ever found in Britain – were probably those used by the hunter-gathering *Homo antecessor*, or ‘pioneer man’, who lived alongside mammoths and sabre-toothed cats in a Britain that was still attached to mainland Europe. At the time Britain’s climate was becoming increasingly cool as it was entering an ice age and the population as a whole was probably no more than a few thousand at most. Much later, around 58,000bc, there is evidence of Neanderthal mammoth hunting sites in what is now Thetford Forest. The same Brecks region was also the scene for large-scale flint hand axe production at Grimes Graves in the Neolithic period around 5000 years ago. A millennium later, in the Early Bronze Age,

there appears to have been sufficient population to warrant the building of a ritual wooden structure – the so-called ‘Seahenge’ at Holme-next-the-Sea on the northwest coast near Old Hunstanton.

Evidence suggests that Norfolk has been continually farmed since the Iron Age, and hoards of coins and torcs found at Snettisham point to the presence of an organised and relatively sophisticated population back in the first century bc. The Iceni tribe were dominant in the region at the time of the Roman Conquest in ad43, and under the leadership of Queen Boudica they rebelled violently against Roman rule in ad60, creating widespread havoc in the region

before being eventually subjugated. The Romans finally left in ad410 after building numerous roads and castles at Brancaster (*Branodunum*), Caister and Burgh Castle (*Gariannonum*) near Great Yarmouth. The next invaders were Anglo-Saxons who settled throughout Norfolk, which became part of the Kingdom of East Anglia ruled by an Anglo-Saxon dynasty. Vikings came a little later, attacking the county in the mid 9th century and killing King Edmund in Suffolk in ad869, leaving Norse names as testament to their presence in many settlements in the east of the county, particularly those that end in ‘-by’ like Scratby, Filby and Hemsby.

Norwich, already an important Anglo-Saxon town, emerged as the

region’s most important hub under Norman rule and both its castle and cathedral were completed within half a century of the Norman Conquest of 1066. By the 14th century, Norfolk was the most densely populated region of England, partly due to intensive agriculture that cultivated the land and reared very large flocks of sheep as part of the burgeoning wool trade. Much of the county’s remaining woodland was cleared for agriculture during this period. During the medieval period, the Church was central to everyday life in Norfolk and more churches, often financed by the wool trade, were built than in any other English county.

At the same time, monastic communities were established around the



All Saints Church, Shipdham, with its unusual wood and lead spire (Walk 30)

county at Little Walsingham, Castle Acre, Thetford, Binham, Burnham Norton and North Creake. It was during this same period that the Norfolk Broads were inadvertently created by the extensive digging of peat for fuel in east Norfolk, the pits created eventually becoming filled with water to create a system of manmade lakes. During this same wool-boom period, Norwich, the county capital, enlarged to the extent that it soon became England's second city and would remain so until the early 18th century when it would be overtaken by Bristol. On the other side of the county from Norwich, King's Lynn developed to become an important port, and by the 17th century this was the busiest in Norfolk and a prominent member of the Hanseatic League, which promoted trade between England and northern Europe.

Compared to the rest of England, Norfolk was little affected by the English Civil War in the mid 17th century, although the county had been seriously shaken by Kett's Rebellion a century earlier in 1549, when 16,000 rebels under the leadership of yeoman farmer Robert Kett temporarily occupied Norwich as protest against the forced enclosure of common land. Kett's men subsequently fought against the King's army, which with the aid of foreign mercenaries killed 3,000 of the rebels before capturing Kett and executing him for treason.

Many grand country houses were built in Norfolk in the 18th century,

including Holkham, Houghton and Felbrigg Halls. It was also around this time that the county became the cradle of the Agrarian Revolution, with landowners like Thomas William Coke ('Coke of Norfolk') and Charles Viscount Townshend ('Turnip Townshend') revolutionising farming with new modern methods and rotational systems. Having successfully made the transition from the production of wool and established itself as England's granary, Norfolk was seriously affected by a widespread depression in farming at the end of the 19th century as a consequence of the importation of grain from across the Atlantic. Many of the county's large estates became neglected or were forced to sell up and, in the aftermath of World War I, some were broken up into smaller units. World War II saw a population increase in the county, as many airfields, mostly bomber bases, were built in Norfolk because of its relative flatness and proximity to Germany. Although primary industries like farming and fishing have ceased to be big employers in the county since World War II, Norfolk still retains its essentially rural character into the 21st century.

### LANDSCAPES

Although almost all of Norfolk lies below 100 metres in altitude there is considerable scenic variety within the county. Little of the land around the Broads rises more than a few metres

above sea level, while some of the Fen region in the county's far west actually lies at sea level or below, the result of an ambitious drainage scheme that was begun by Dutch engineers in the 17th century and continued into the early 19th century, when wind-powered pumps were replaced by coal-powered steam engines.

The underlying geology is chalk but this only comes to the surface in parts of the west of the county. Most of what is seen on the surface is the result of fairly recent geomorphic activity – the land-shaping that took place at the end of the Ice Age when retreating glaciers laid down huge deposits of sand, mud and gravel on the underlying bedrock. In areas like

the Brecks in the southwest of the county, the deposit was just a thin layer of sand, while elsewhere, large depositions of clay ensured that the resulting soil would be sufficiently fertile to provide for intensive farming for millennia. In North Norfolk, the Cromer Ridge, a low range of hills that marks the highest land in the county rising to 102 metres, was formed by old glacial moraines at the edge of the ice sheet during the last glacial period. The ridge, which lies just inland from the coast and extends west from Cromer, is characterised by large areas of open heath mixed with deciduous woodland.

The North Norfolk coast, most of which is designated an Area of



*Eroding cliffs at Happisburgh with lighthouse and church in the distance (Walk 4)*

# 1 NORTHEAST COAST AND THE BROADS

Canoeing at Horstead Mill near Coltishall (Walk 5)

## WALK 1

*Winterton-on-Sea*

<b>Start</b>	Beach car park, Winterton-on-Sea (TG 498 198)
<b>Distance</b>	5 miles (8km)
<b>Time</b>	2hr
<b>Map</b>	OS Landranger 134 Norwich & The Broads, Outdoor Leisure 40 The Broads
<b>Refreshments</b>	Pub in Winterton, café at car park in summer
<b>Public Transport</b>	Public Transport Regular bus service from Great Yarmouth
<b>Parking</b>	Beach car park (closes at 4pm prompt in winter)

This coastal route beginning and ending in the village of Winterton-on-Sea takes in a variety of landscapes along the way. Most impressive of all is the large area of sand dunes immediately north of the village – a nature reserve with several rare and distinctive species. Elsewhere, the route follows farm tracks through woodland and quiet country roads with virtually no traffic.

Start at the beach car park, with fine views of the coastline to the south across the dunes. Head towards the huts at the northern end of the car park then follow the track inland through the dunes towards the village and church. Reaching a group of houses, go past these to take the road to the right. At the end of a short row of houses a footpath continues across **Winterton Dunes** nature reserve. ▶ Walk through an area of scrub on the edge of the dunes. The main path runs in a northerly direction parallel to a fence, which, after a while, it runs right next to. Beyond the fence lies a large open area of heath with woodland beyond while to the right are high dunes separating the path from the beach.

**Winterton Dunes National Nature Reserve** is unusual in that its dunes support acidic plant life: most dunes on the north Norfolk coast support calcareous flora. This factor means that the ecology here

A couple of notice boards at the entrance here give information about the wildlife that can be found in the dunes.

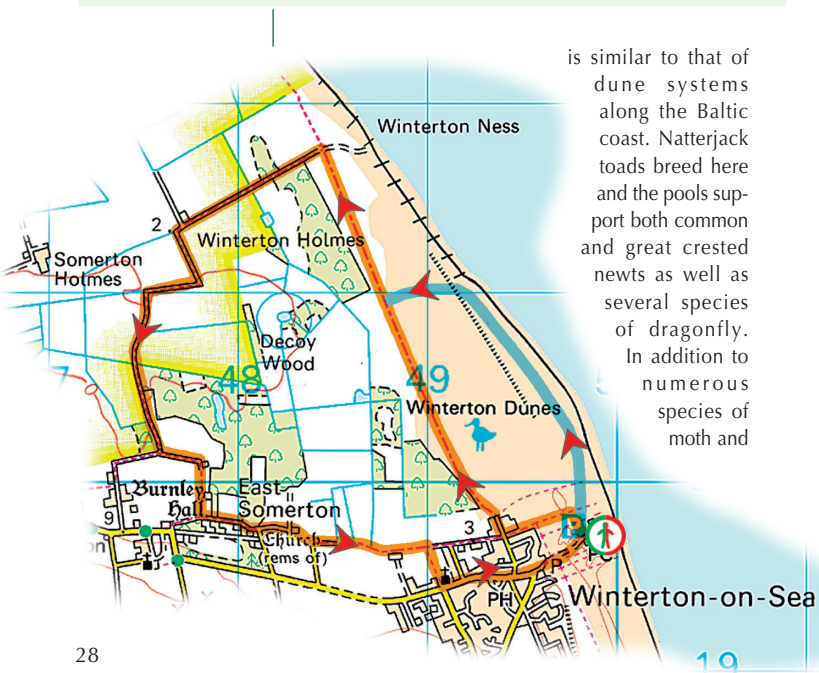
## WINTERTON-ON-SEA



Visiting Winterton-on-Sea back in 1722, the writer Daniel Defoe noted that many of the village houses were constructed from the timbers of wrecked ships. This part of the Norfolk coast has long been hazardous for ships because of its shifting sand banks and wrecking

was a common pursuit in this region in the past. Today, thanks to its location at little more than sea level, the village is highly vulnerable to flooding and sea erosion, and a flood siren system has been installed.

If parking at Winterton beach car park in winter bear in mind that the gate is locked at 4pm.



is similar to that of dune systems along the Baltic coast. Natterjack toads breed here and the pools support both common and great crested newts as well as several species of dragonfly.

In addition to numerous species of moth and

butterfly, over 170 species of bird have been recorded here and wintering marsh harriers are frequently seen, as are nightjars in summer. Adders are common.

► The path veers away from the fence to pass through an area of birches before arriving close to **Winterton Ness**, where there is a crossroads of tracks. Turn left to walk through concrete defences that date from World War II and go through the gate to follow the track as it leads inland alongside the mixed woodland of **Winterton Holmes**. At the end of the woodland the track passes by wet grazing meadows. Continue past a track on the left to arrive at some isolated farm buildings and a concrete farmyard that may or may not be covered by a smelly layer of slurry. Follow the track around the field edge to the left next to a hedge. This soon turns sharply right to continue along a concrete farm track lined with willows before reaching another road at a T-junction. Turn left to

*Alternative route:* Follow the beach from the car park for about a mile and then head across the dunes to reach the fence. Follow this to the concrete defences.

*Winterton Dunes Nature Reserve, a haven for birds and natterjack toads*



follow Holmes Road, which has a large expanse of wet grazing meadows on either side of it, and turn left at the next junction.

Follow the road right at the corner by a cottage and continue past brick cottages to arrive at a junction with woodland ahead and a high brick wall to the left. Turn left along Low Road to pass **Burnley Hall** farm. Follow the road through a patch of woodland at **East Somerton** where the impressive **ruin** of St Mary's Church can be seen through trees to the right. This 15th-century Perpendicular-style ruin is covered in ivy and has an oak tree growing in its roofless chancel. The church once had its own parish and probably last saw use in the late 17th century.

Continue in the same direction past a barn conversion and pond. Turn right at the white house, then left towards Winterton's lighthouse and church tower immediately ahead. Where the road swings around to the right take the track that continues in the same direction as the church. Continue along this until passing Low Farm then take the footpath to the right that leads past allotments to Holy Trinity and All Saints Church.

**Holy Trinity and All Saints Church**, like many churches along the Norfolk coast, has a tall Perpendicular tower that stands as a beacon to those out to sea. However, despite local rumour that it is 'a herring and a half higher', the tower is actually 35 feet shorter than that of Cromer's St Peter and St Paul Church.

Turn left at the road to pass a green with the village sign and, a little further on, the Fisherman's Return pub. Go past the post office and The Loke on the right to follow the road to the beach and the car park.

## WALK 2

### *Potter Heigham and Hickling Broad*

<b>Start</b>	Medieval bridge, Potter Heigham (TG 420 185)
<b>Distance</b>	5½ miles (8.8km)
<b>Time</b>	2hr 15min
<b>Map</b>	OS Landranger 134 Norwich & The Broads, Outdoor Leisure 40 The Broads
<b>Refreshments</b>	Pub and cafés in Potter Heigham
<b>Public Transport</b>	Regular bus service from Great Yarmouth and North Walsham
<b>Parking</b>	Plentiful parking at Lathams store just north of bridge (three-hour limit)

Beginning and ending at Potter Heigham, a Broadland village heavily involved in the summer boat hire trade, this is a surprisingly tranquil walk once away from the village. The route skirts the southern side of Hickling Broad, a large expanse of fresh water that is home to rare wildlife unique to the Broads, before following a stretch of the River Thurne, one of northeast Norfolk's principal waterways.

Note that this walk passes through part of Hickling Broad National Nature Reserve and the Norfolk Wildlife Trust that manages it has a no dogs policy on the reserve.

Start at the north side of the medieval bridge and walk along the road away from the river past boat hire offices on the left and Lathams store on the right. Go past a caravan park on the left before coming to the junction of Station Road on the right. Turn right to reach the main A149 then cross this carefully to walk along Station Road where it continues on the other side. At the T-junction turn right along Church Road and continue past bungalows and thatched cottages to reach St Nicholas Church, a pretty thatched building with a round tower and a 14th-century octagonal belfry above. Inside is a splendid hammerbeam roof, wall paintings and a rare 15th-century brick font.