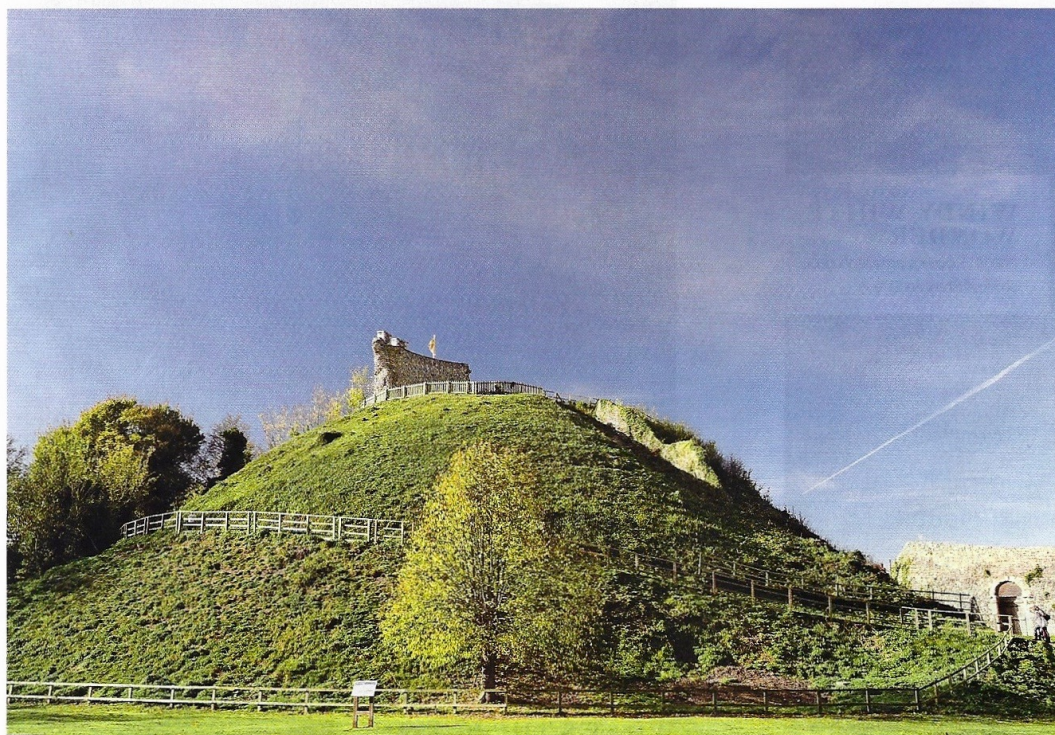




SUFFOLK DOG WALKS

Mike Trippitt is a journalist who enjoys exploring the county, especially with his clumber spaniel, Farley



The motte of Clare Castle

Six of the best

Walkers and dogs are welcome to ramble a range of routes around Clare Castle Country Park

The wood burner is burning beautifully. Come on in." I am sure that if Farley, our Clumber spaniel, could read he would have been enticed into the café by the blackboard's message outside, just as I was. On this chilly but bright morning our walk around Suffolk's smallest town starts with a cup of coffee at Platform One Café, on the former railway station at the heart of the Clare Castle Country Park.

My wife, also called Clare, found a table outside with room for us all. Dogs are not allowed in the station's former ticket

hall, where drinks, meals and snacks are now served, but they are not left out. A water bowl sits outside the front door next to a pile of logs for the burner. There are even hooks in the walls, so owners can tether their four-legged companions with their leads if the need arises.

Great Eastern Railway's Clare Station did not survive the Beeching Report, though its buildings remain as an almost complete '1865 style' example. The track has gone, but the platforms guide us on our way.

Farley ferrets around in the cut grass and fallen leaves, while

I listen to the breeze through the trees and contemplate this monument to a bygone age. I could imagine Arnold Ridley's Ghost Train rumbling through here on a dark winter's night. The legacy left by the railway continues east.

The route of the old line known as The Railway Walk makes for flat, easy walking through a shallow valley lined with hedges, bushes and, for the most part, fencing. The nearest road is 200 metres away, so the one and three-quarter-mile stroll through this extension of the country park to the River Stour and back is

perfect for dogs to be off lead.

Clare rewards visitors to its town centre and walkers to its surrounds in equal measure. Much is written about the varied architecture, attractive streets, independent shops and tearooms, and its historical interest. But Clare Castle Country Park will please walkers and dog walkers most. Derek Blake, a trustee of Clare Castle Park Trust, which manages the park, and a former town councillor says that dogs and their owners are very welcome. "They are a really important group of people who come to the park. They are a big part of our core audience and will remain so," says Derek. "There is a regular set of people who drive to the park to walk their dogs. Others who live in the town walk their dogs there too. The park is really important to them, and so they are really important to us."

We spend some time walking about the park - along the riverbank and around the remains of the 12th century motte and bailey castle. Although the smell of rabbits and squirrels

is more interesting to Farley, the views and contrasts within the park are a fascination to us. The combination of man-made and natural heritage is unique.

Leaving the park behind Farley shows barely a sign of protest at being on his lead, while we cross Cavendish Road and the river underneath. From here the Clare Loop - a walk of between two and four-and-a-half miles - will take us around the north of the town, through Hermitage Farm, back down Snow Hill and around Clare Camp and Clare Common, before leading past Clare Priory, back along The Stour into the country park to finish.

This circular walk is one of six walks focused on the country park, devised and created by the Clare Walkers Group. Under the chairmanship of Derek Blake, the group has produced a website and leaflets giving details of each walk, its level of difficulty and points of interest. Clare is designated a Walkers Are Welcome town, having received accreditation on October 3 last year. "We are the first town in

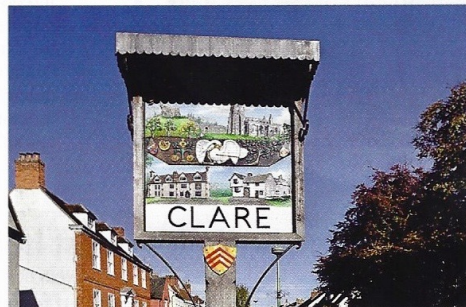


Mike and Farley



ABOVE: The picturesque walk

RIGHT: Clare announces itself



west Suffolk to get this and the second in the county," says Derek.

Walking, with or without dogs, here in Clare could not be easier. Routes are well marked, safe and vary in length. An information board in the park provides details of all six walks and even has QR codes, so maps can be downloaded onto smartphones there and then. Farley is in his element on the east and northern part of the loop. Woodlands, animal trails and scents, and the crunch of leaves underfoot fill his senses. His twitching nose, floppy ears and wide, brown eyes take it all in. His legs cover many more miles than ours, and his metronomic tail wags without pause. Like all spaniels, he is a happy, busy dog.

He goes back on his lead, panting, head up, tongue flapping, while we walk through the farmyard. Signs here direct that dogs be kept on leads. Fortunately, we keep him tethered and to heal all through the willow-lined avenue of Hermitage Farm drive. A meadow full of sheep further down would

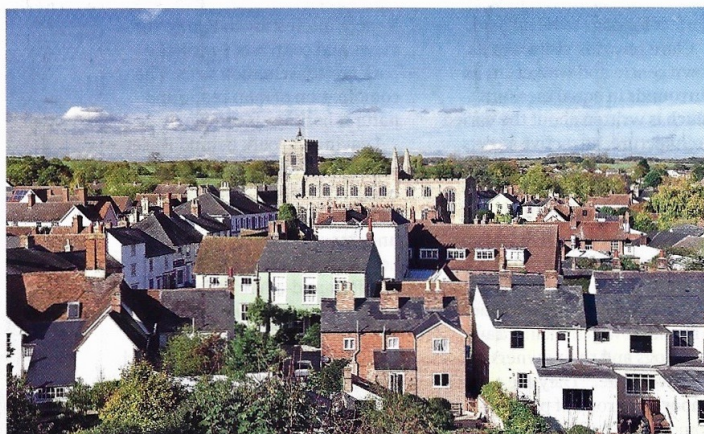
COUNTRYSIDE

have been far too exciting for him to remain under control.

Although Clare and I have visited the town before, we had not ventured near Clare Common previously. Following the Clare Loop, and bringing Farley with us, really adds another dimension to this most pleasing of destinations. On the public footpaths and farm tracks skirting the common, rolling landscapes and wide vistas surround us. Occasionally we pass walkers, some with dogs, some without, but this well thought out route takes us far from the madding crowd. Save for the church tower, the town lies hidden in the slightest of dips. Isolation and openness combine to bring peace.

Before we get to the Stoke by Clare road Farley goes on his lead once more. Ahead we spot three burly rams grazing in a small paddock, heads down, rhythmically chewing. Farley smells them long before they sense us.

The Clare Loop wends its way back to Clare Castle joining the



The view from the castle

'Save for the church tower, the town lies hidden inside the slightest of dips. Isolation and openness combine to bring peace'



New Cut of the River Stour. Farley jumps straight in, drinks the cold, clear water and looks at us expectantly for a ball or stick to be tossed in. Once he's back on dry land, we open an old, heavy wooden gate in the nearby wall and step into the silent, timeless world of Clare Priory. Among the ruins and grounds of the priory, where Augustinian friars live and offer a retreat, the spirituality, even for the non-religious, is undeniable. Our visit to Clare is enriched by just a few moments within these walls.

Once back in the relative bustle of the country park, we contemplate our options. Our six and a quarter miles have given us huge variety, and Farley great fun. We could head home, or walk up Clare's streets to continue our day's pleasure. It requires little thought. Ten minutes later with Farley ready for a snooze, we slide into easy chairs at the dog-friendly Bell public house. A pint of the landlord's finest is a welcome end to a splendid walk. ♦

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