



SUFFOLK DOG WALKS

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



The walkers and their dogs

Kindred spirits

A group outing in Brandon Country Park with fellow Clumber owners ... and maybe a ghost?

Alexa, what's the weather in Brandon," I ask our artificial intelligence device. "Right now in Brandon Suffolk it is minus one degree. You can expect a high of one degree and a low of minus one degree."

"Well Farley," I say, turning to our Clumber spaniel, who is looking out of the bedroom window. "We're not supposed to have snow at this time of year. Better make the most of it."

Farley, wife Clare and I make the one-hour journey to Brandon along Suffolk lanes that stitch a patchwork of fields white with virgin snow. It is the first Sunday of the meteorological spring, yet the scene is distinctly wintry. Armed with our winter gear and warm boots (there's no such thing

as bad weather, remember) we have come to Brandon Country Park for a walk among the paths of the former Brandon Hall estate and the trees of Thetford Forest.

Parking is plentiful at the 37-acre country park. At weekends two hours costs £1.50 and all-day parking is £3. The visitors' centre houses toilets, a small shop, an information centre and the welcoming Copper Beech Tea Room. Clare gets two takeaway coffees, while I ask about dogs.

"When you are within the park dogs should be kept on a lead, or under very close control. That means for most dogs they must be on a lead," says Martina Moss, business support officer at the country park. "Once you are out into the forest, The Forestry

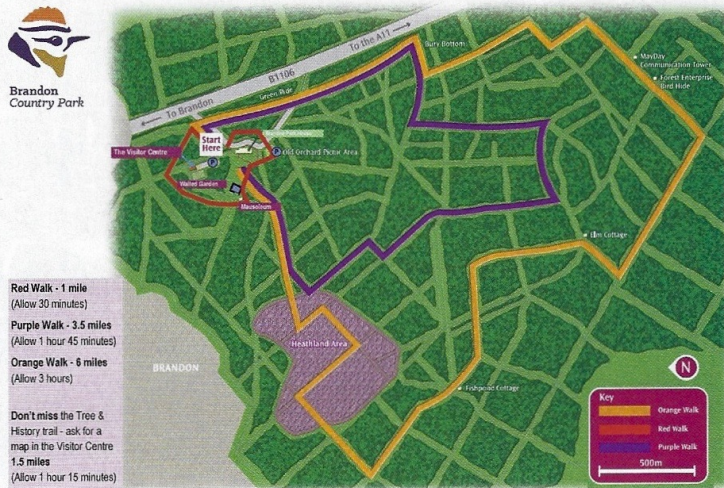
Commission is happy for dogs to be off the lead, but again they must be under control."

I can see a children's play area just outside the visitors' centre. The bustle of long summer afternoons, and the noise and excitement of youngsters playing within it will arrive in a few months, but a cursory look around reveals that there is plenty to do here, and not just for walkers.

Martina Moss says there is a range of visitors to Brandon. "There are families that come for the play area and the activities that we have here. At weekends in particular we have lots of cyclists. We also have birdwatchers. We have some quite unusual birds in the area. Although rare in the UK we have



Brandon Country Park



Red Walk - 1 mile
(Allow 30 minutes)
Purple Walk - 3.5 miles
(Allow 1 hour 45 minutes)
Orange Walk - 6 miles
(Allow 3 hours)

Don't miss the Tree & History trail - ask for a map in the Visitor Centre
1.5 miles
(Allow 1 hour 15 minutes)

several pairs of firecrests in the park. Further in the forest we also have nightjars. People come for photographic opportunities and, of course, we get lots of dog walkers."

With Farley on his lead, his tail wagging furiously and his brain unable to resolve the dilemma of whether to lead with his eyes or his nose, we set off enthusiastically along the 'purple walk'. Our Trails Map, obtained from the visitors' centre, shows us that our walk is 3.5 miles and that we should allow one hour and 45 minutes. The 'red walk' is one-mile long (allow 30 minutes) and the 'orange walk' is six miles (allow three hours).

But Brandon Country Park flows seamlessly into Thetford Forest. Miles of paths in this vast woodland landscape provide easy safe walking and cycling, and the forest provides shelter from a chilly easterly wind.

Once outside the boundary of the country park into the forest proper Farley is free to roam. Today he is in his element. For not only is he in his favourite environment – woodland with all the smells and trails left by squirrels, deer and other forest-dwellers – he is not alone.

We have come to Brandon to take part in a walk organised by the Walking with Clumbers group. Rod and Barbara Weston, who have owned Clumber spaniels for 45 years and take

part in the Discover Dogs event at Crufts, set the group up four years ago as a chance for pet owners to get together and meet other Clumbers. After all, it is rare for owners to see other Clumber spaniels.

Rod says the dogs seem to enjoy getting together and do appear to recognise their own breed, reacting to Clumbers differently to other breeds. "If we're sitting in a café, waiting to start a walk and we get Labradors and other spaniels walking passed, the dogs take no notice. But if there is a white Clumber, seen in the distance, they are all jumping up and rushing to meet

BELOW: The mausoleum at Brandon Country Park.



WALKIES

Location: Brandon Country Park is just south of Brandon town centre, off the B1106 Bury Road, five minutes from the A11. Satnav: IP27 OSU

Open: dawn to dusk every day except Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Visitors' centre and tearoom 10am - 4.30pm, April - October, 10am - 3.30pm, November - March

Nearby vets: The Old Golfhouse Veterinary Group, 71 High St, Brandon IP27 0AU. T: 01842 814043
Aquarius Veterinary Centre, 30 George St, Brandon IP27 0BX. T: 01842 810480

Trails:

Forest & Heath Trail: 3.5 miles
Duration: 1.5-2 hours
Terrain: gentle walk on firm paths and soft forest tracks.

Firecrest Trail: 6 miles
Duration: 2-3 hours
Terrain: firm paths and soft forest tracks. Can be muddy in places.

Redwood Trail: 1 mile
Duration: 1 hour
Terrain: firm paths suitable for push chairs and all-terrain wheelchairs.

Tree Trail: 1.5 miles
Duration: 1 hour
Terrain: firm paths and forest paths. Suitable for pushchairs and all-terrain wheelchairs.

Clumber spaniels:
Clumber Spaniel Club
clumberspanielclub.org.uk
Kennel Club at thekennelclub.org.uk

The Walking With Clumber group organises walks throughout the country every year. You can find them on Facebook





and greet it." Walking for a few miles with six other Clumbers – Yulo, Louis, Chloe, Bella, Wilma and Biggles – Farley is the epitome of a happy dog. These handsome, friendly and lovable animals running freely and safely are an engaging sight.

People without dogs ask us about the breed. Most have not heard of a Clumber spaniel before and all are surprised to learn that the Duke of Newcastle developed it as a working dog in the 18th century at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire. Although their determination and stamina make them excellent working dogs, Rod Weston says they have a brilliant temperament and make ideal pets.

"They are much more laid back than other spaniels. They require less exercise, at about an hour a day, and are more than happy to spend the day sleeping indoors. One of ours gets exercise by following the sun from room to room. They're brilliant with children and good with people."

Clumbers are not aggressive, according to Rod, but do have a reputation for being aloof and, on occasions, stubborn. "They

have a view about what is right in the world. The stubbornness is only when they think we're doing something wrong. If you do what they deem is right, they're happy."

As we walk among the snow, enjoying the environment and buoyed by our happy companions, my mind wanders. To call this group of sociable domesticated animals a pack is to do them an injustice. But what is the collective noun for such a group of spaniels? It ought to be a clumber of spaniels, I muse. It just sounds right.

Back at the visitors' centre, a hot cup of coffee and a sausage

TOP: Brandon Country Park has three route marked walks of various lengths and a number of cycle trails.

BELOW: The walled garden is a good place to stroll and take a picnic



and bacon roll are just the treat we need after a quick look at the park's walled garden and mausoleum.

Martina Moss explains how Edward Bliss, a businessman who made his money at flint knapping during the Napoleonic wars, originally created the park in 1820. He had the big house built and created the woodland and arboretum. He also had a mausoleum built for his family. Legend has it that a ghost wanders the park at night.

"The ghost is supposedly that of Baron Boretto," says Martina. "He did have some strange habits during his lifetime, and I think people assumed he'd become a ghost. We have night safaris here, so I have often walked around the park at night. I've also walked my dog late at night. I've never seen a ghost, so I am very sceptical about it."

While Brandon Country Park may not be the best place to come to see a ghost at night, it is worthy of a visit during the day. Certainly Farley and his pals, all now settled down asleep and awaiting their journeys home, have had a great day. ♦

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