



NELSON'S COUNTY

PART ONE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE TRIPPITT

In the first of two features Mike Trippitt heads east in Campervan George to Norfolk, and discovers royalty, golden beaches, sublime creeks and a land of spectacular sunsets

Sandringham

Sandringham was bought for Albert Edward, Prince of Wales in 1862. He became King Edward VII upon his mother Queen Victoria's death. The house has remained the private country house of monarchs ever since. Our Queen inherited Sandringham from her late father King George VI in 1952. There is more about the house, and details of admission fees and opening hours at www.sandringhamestate.co.uk

Lord Nelson's heroics at the Battle of Trafalgar, his "Kiss me, Hardy" and death on 21st October 1805 are among the few things I've retained from school history lessons. That Nelson died below decks on HMS Victory, and that his relationship with Lady Emma Hamilton is one of the great love stories are well known. But where he was born and where he grew up is less familiar.

So, George and I have come to north Norfolk, 'Nelson's County,' to find out more about where he spent his early life, and to enjoy its diverse coastline and heritage. On a warm late summer morning, Sandringham House, the country retreat of The Queen, is our first stop. The house is seven miles north of Kings Lynn and at the heart of a 20,000-acre estate. It is neither castle nor palace, but a Jacobethan country house built in 1870. The Queen's grandfather, George V, said it was: "The place I love better than anywhere else in the world." Sandringham's 600-acre

country park is open all year round with free access. The vast woods and paths are great for walking. The house is open to the public when the Royals are not in residence, as are 60 acres of gardens. There's a gift shop and café that can be enjoyed without paying to go in.

I choose not to go into the house, but I do buy a ticket to spend a couple of hours wandering through the lawns, gardens and footpaths. The admission fee also includes access to the museum of Royal vehicles housed with another café in the old stable block.

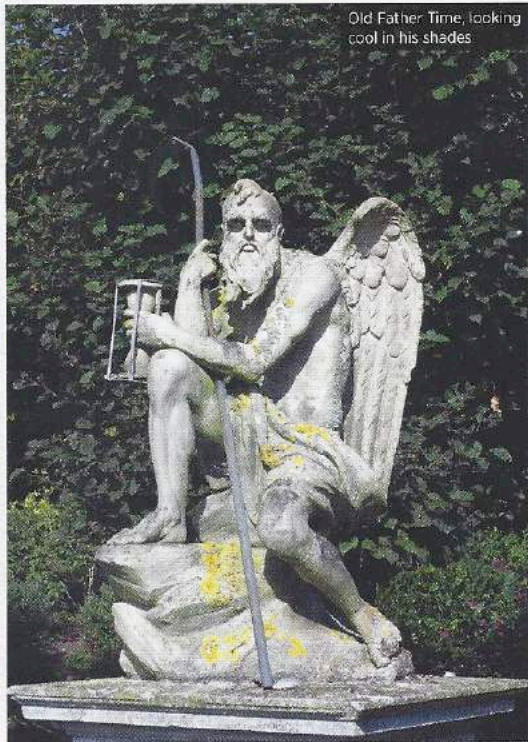
It's one thing to visit royal palaces, stately homes and castles to learn of England's distant past, but it's another to go to those places where recent history was made. Like the Royal Yacht Britannia, now a museum ship in Edinburgh, Sandringham's motor museum depicts the relatively recent past. One exhibit brings a reflective smile. Among the landaus, carriages and motor cars that exude both luxury and royalty, sits the late Queen Mother's personal



Brancaster Beach



Brancaster harbour



Old Father Time, looking cool in his shades



George at Sadringham Caravan Club Site

HUES OF GREEN AND AN ARRAY OF COLOUR MAKE A FINE SPECTACLE IN THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE

buggy. Painted in her racing colours, it was used in the latter years of the Queen Mother's life for outdoor events such as Royal Ascot and other race meetings, when the elderly lady was unable to walk the distances she once could. It is nothing grander than a converted golf cart, but it stirs living memories and is a valuable contribution to the Royal transport story.

The formal and informal gardens in which the main house nestles are a delightful mix of trees, bushes, lawns, flowers and a lake. Hues of green and an array of colour make a fine spectacle in the bright sunshine. In the North Garden a statue of Old Father Time, bought for the estate by the Queen Mother in 1951, stands immutable. But wait, has someone played a prank? On walking close to the statue I look up to a blue sky from where a golden sun casts deep, dark shadows on the ground below. I laugh and wonder whether the illusion is deliberate, or just a consequence of the conditions. There's no doubt, with shadows around his eyes caused by the high direct sunlight, Old Father Time appears to be wearing sunglasses.

From here a path through the trees leads up to St Mary's. The little church and lynch gate are seen by millions on TV news each Christmas Day when the Royal Family walks from the house to church for morning service. This is

quintessential Royal Norfolk: the sense of history, standing at the spot where the Queen has been coming for over 60 years, is palpable.

The Caravan and Motorhome Club site, at the heart of the Sandringham estate, is where we spend our first night. Set among forest pines, it is just down the lane from The Camping and Caravanning Club site. Both are bounded by forest, and are sheltered, peaceful and secure. Paths through the trees abound.

Next morning, we arrive at our next halt early. Marshview campsite at Heacham is seven miles from Sandringham, and although facilities are basic, it is close to the sea and just the place to stay for my next adventure. Nigel the site owner checks me in. He's been at the site a couple of years and improvements are ongoing. A little later I see him heading off on foot towards a group of cows that have escaped from a neighbouring field. One cow is moo-ing a melancholy call. "Are they your cows?" I ask. "No," says Nigel. "They belong to the farmer." Though they are not in danger Nigel decides he'll go over to get them back in their field. "The one moo-ing", he says, "lost a calf recently. She's still



Familiar Lynch Gate at Sandringham Church



Late afternoon, Heacham beach



Sunset, Heacham Beach



George at Brancaster harbour



Thornham Harbour

calling it and walking around searching for it." I felt a moment of sadness for the bereaved animal.

Leaving Nigel to his rescue mission, and with George settled on his pitch for the day, I stride out into the fresh breeze and onto Heacham beach heading for Hunstanton. To my left, a foamy white surf fizzles and crashes onto golden sand. The Wash, the Lincolnshire coast and the turbines of The Lincolnshire Offshore Wind Farm lie beyond. On the opposite side of the seawall an array of beach chalets look out: flat-topped, pitched roofed, single-storey, double-storey, wooden slatted, corrugated iron. The variety seems endless.

Hunstanton is a Victorian resort that grew from the nearby village now known as Old Hunstanton. It's a two-and-a-half-mile walk from Heacham, though its famous red and white

cliffs are a further mile or so beyond. On a stroll along the seawall path and the promenade, where there's lots to see, concentration is important. Hunstanton is the only east coast resort to face west. What is north feels south, and when the afternoon sun hangs over the sea—uniquely on the east coast—it is very easy to set off in the wrong direction!

The town is a popular coastal get away. Twice a day the North Sea tide recedes leaving miles of golden sand. It's a pleasing little town, with great cliff-top views, as well as an array of amusements and traditional seaside attractions.

I spend an hour or so at Hunstanton Sea Life Centre, a charitable aquarium, sanctuary and rescue centre. Seals, penguins, otters, marine birds and countless species of fish are homed here. It's a real 'up close and personal' experience: huge fish, cute seals and comical little penguins are in some cases just feet away. When I leave, if there's nothing else Sea Life has taught me, it has at least dispelled the myth that fish only grow in proportion to their surroundings. Many a piscine resident arrived

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having outgrown its previous home in captivity.

After a full day in Hunstanton, I've a ninety-minute walk back to George. Later, with visitors and locals alike, who have ventured down to Heacham beach especially, we are treated to a wonderful sunset. To the west, the sun slides into The Wash turning the sky from yellow, through orange to a deep blue. Just after dawn tomorrow at Cromer, only 40 miles away, it will rise again from the North Sea.

George and I have two nights booked at our next stop: Deepdale Backpackers and Camping, a site between Hunstanton and Wells-next-the-Sea. The coastline, and consequently the A149 road, runs east-west through nature reserves and Norfolk's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Walkers, naturalists and birders flock here.



The Wash shimmers in the sunlight



Beach huts at Old Hunstanton



Penguin at the Sealife Centre



IN THE CREEK ACROSS THE MARSHES SAILBOATS BASK IN THE AFTERNOON SUNLIGHT. THERE IS AN ABSORBING CALM HERE

Camping

We travelled 153 miles in North Norfolk and stayed at: **The Sandringham Estate Caravan and Motorhome Club Site**

Glucksburg Woods, Sandringham, Norfolk, PE35 6EZ

Marshview Camping

72 South Beach Rd, Heacham, Hunstanton, Kings Lynn, Norfolk, PE31 7BB

Deepdale Backpackers & Camping

Deepdale Farm, Burnham Deepdale, Norfolk, PE31 8DD

Brancaster beach, where we stop for a walk, is renowned for kite flying and kite karting. Only creeks and rivulets snaking to the sea break its vast, firm gently sloping sands. Further east one such creek forms a small harbour at Brancaster Staithe. The fortunes of the little harbours at Thornham, Burnham Overy Staithe, Morston, Blakeney and Brancaster have ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Each is a delightful little spot where small fishing vessels and pleasure craft sit on mud for most of the 12-hour tide cycle. Coastal silting caused by longshore drift has re-shaped north Norfolk's harbours leaving them idylls for artists, photographers and lovers of the outdoors, rather than at the heart of

maritime commerce. A 300-year-old coal barn standing empty and brooding at Thornham Harbour is all that is left of its thriving past.

Today at Brancaster there is no wind. Visitors sit in the late afternoon sunshine breathing in the salty air. In the creek across the marshes, sailboats bask in the afternoon sunlight. There is an absorbing calm here; a calm that endures throughout our afternoon and evening. It's a wonderful spot to watch the world go by and to see the tide rise and fall in East Anglia's creeks and marshes.

Our first two days in Norfolk have given us spectacular views, fascinating history and great memories. I can't wait until tomorrow... ■