

## Exploring East Anglia's Rich Heritage: History, Culture and Landscape

Romain Nugou



**East Anglia** is bordered on all sides by formidable barriers — the North Sea to the east and north, the Essex Forest to the south and the Fens to the west. In Anglo-Saxon times (6-10th century BCE), the Kingdom of East Anglia, founded by the Angles, a people originating from the peninsula of Angeln in today's Northern Germany, maintained its independence as a separate kingdom. The region bears the name of this Germanic people, and so does the country as the name "England" means "land of the Angles". Its eastern coast was more open and inviting than other parts of **Britain**, and both invasion and commerce could be attempted more readily. By early Norman times, East Anglia was the most populous part of **England**; and in the Middle Ages the export of raw wool to the Lower Rhine gradually developed into a native textile industry, centred on Norwich and the Stour Valley. For centuries up to the Industrial Revolution, East Anglia was the most important industrial region of England. The low-lying land, noted in literature, including Noël Coward's *Private Lives* – "Very flat, Norfolk", provides fertile loam soils and a warm climate ideal for growing crops.

### The enduring legacy of the Normans

The story of the Norman conquest of England is well known. This insular territory already had a long history of conquests from 'outsiders' from the Angles, Saxons, Danes, and eventually the Normans when William the Conqueror claimed the throne in 1066. The House of Normandy went on to rule England for another 100 years, followed by other rulers from **France** like the Plantagenêts, before the Tudors took

over in 1485. The Normans left an important architectural legacy of Romanesque architecture developed in the various lands under their dominion or influence in the 11-12th centuries. They introduced large numbers of castles and fortifications, including Norman keeps, and monasteries, abbeys, churches and cathedrals, in a style characterised by the usual Romanesque rounded arches and especially massive proportions.



Æthelthryth, also known as St. Etheldreda (c. 636-679), Queen of Northumbria, founded an abbey in 673 CE in the Isle of Ely, in today's Cambridgeshire. Abbot Simon, who owed his appointment to William the Conqueror, began the construction of the great Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity here in 1083. Ely Cathedral rose like a giant ship in the middle of the dense marshes of the Fenlands and attracted many pilgrims who came to visit Etheldreda's tomb. The building has evolved since its Norman origins and the west front with its impressive Galilee porch is a notable example of Early English Gothic. The octagonal crossing with its distinctive lantern is the work of architect Alan of Walsingham, sacristan then prior at Ely, and the King's master carpenter, William Hurley. Another masterpiece is the Cathedral of Norwich, one of the most beautiful cathedrals of England. Built in the Romanesque and late Gothic styles, it has a dramatic stone spire, the second tallest in England after Salisbury (96m), and many treasures such as the largest number of fine roof bosses anywhere in Christendom.



The Normans are equally famous for their castles and fortifications. Castle Rising in Norfolk is one of the grandest surviving Norman castles anywhere. Although much is lost, its original scale can be gauged from the huge earth works. The keep (c. 1140), one of the largest and most ornate in [England](#), remains to tell the story of its builder William d'Albini (1109-1176) who married Henry I's widow and became the Earl of Sussex. To the east of the keep, a small square gatehouse is set in the bank near a fragment of the castle's 14th-century brick curtain wall. A rectangular enclosure, strongly banked and ditched, guards the gatehouse and to the west there is a smaller flanking enclosure. Also in the inner enclosure are the foundations of an 11th-century Norman chapel, uncovered in the 19th century, that is thought to be older than the castle itself. The castle passed to the Howard family in 1544, and it remains in their hands today, the current owner being a descendant of William d'Albini II. In a reference to its Norman past maybe, the city of Norwich bought its castle in 1894 and converted it into a museum, which houses today's Norwich Museum and Gallery.

#### [The Norfolk Broads: beautiful landscape, diverse wildlife and important cultural heritage](#)

The Norfolk Broads, a network of mostly navigable rivers and lakes, is the setting of Arthur Ransome's children's adventure stories, *Swallows and Amazons*. The Broads were regarded as natural elements until the 1960s when botanist and ecologist Dr Joyce Lambert proved that they were, in fact, artificial, having emerged through the flooding of early peat excavations. The Romans first exploited the rich peat beds of the area for fuel, and in the Middle Ages the local monasteries began to excavate the 'turbaries' (peat



diggings) as a business, selling fuel to Norwich and Great Yarmouth. When sea levels rose, the pits began to flood. Despite the construction of windpumps and dykes, the flooding continued and resulted in the today's typical Broad, with their reed beds, grazing marshes and wet woodland. Look out for marsh harriers, great crested grebes and the elusive bittern!



### Great Houses and Gardens of East Anglia

East Anglia is a haven for historic houses and gardens, including grand country estates and some of the most beautiful gardens of the country: Lord and Lady Walpole's Mannington Hall, a three-storey moated manor house constructed in local flint stone, with gardens containing thousands of roses; Silverstone Farm, home and garden of designer George Carter with its 1920s neo-Georgian farmhouse, library and large entrance hall in the barn and its elegant formal gardens; Home Hale Hall Gardens designed by Chelsea Gold Medal winning designer Arne Maynard; the 16th-century moated hall at Otley, one of the most perfect examples of unspoiled late medieval architecture in England with its unequalled Great Hall and Linenfold Parlour; Also Humphry Repton's landscape garden at Sheringham Park, Beth Chatto's inspiring garden, Capability Brown's Audley End, and Helmingham Hall Gardens designed by Lady Xa Tollemache without forgetting East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens featured in 1001 Gardens you must see before you die. East Anglia's history of wealthy landowners means a legacy of magnificent stately homes such as Oxburgh, Felbrigg, Blickling, Holkham, Houghton, Somerleyton, the Royal Estate at Sandringham, and Anglesey Abbey.





### The Anglo-Saxon Royal Burial Site at Sutton Hoo

The burial complex at Sutton Hoo is one of the most significant sites in English Archaeology. Archaeologists have been excavating the area since 1938, when an undisturbed ship burial containing a wealth of Anglo-Saxon artifacts was discovered. A series of eighteen burial mounds have been identified and excavated, dating to the 6th and 7th centuries CE. The largest of the burrows revealed a 27m-long timber ship and a grave with its central burial chamber still intact. Over 200 objects were excavated from the chamber which testified to the skill of early medieval artisans and the wealth of the individual buried beneath the mound. Initially interpreted as a Viking burial, it became clear that Sutton Hoo was the burial ground of 7th-century royalty and is now thought to be the grave of King Raedwald of East Anglia, buried in 625 CE.



### East Anglian landscapes: a source of inspiration

The picturesque landscapes of the region have long attracted and inspired writers, poets and painters such as Charles Dickens, who chose the area for his novel *David Copperfield*, and natives like Rupert Brooke, L.P. Hartley, Arthur Ransome, Constable, Cotman and Gainsborough. The charming market town of Sudbury in Suffolk is well known as a centre for the production of textiles, weaving woollen cloth in medieval times and transitioning to the production of silk in the 18th century. The town is notable for its art, being the birthplace of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), whose landscapes offered inspiration to John Constable (1776-1837), another painter of the surrounding Stour Valley area. After a major refurbishment completed in 2022, Gainsborough's childhood home and the new gallery spaces designed by ZMMA now display paintings from throughout the artist's career and exhibitions on other later Suffolk painters such as John Constable and Cedric Morris (1889-1992). In nearby Ipswich, Christchurch Mansion contains the biggest collection of paintings by Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable outside of London, along with collections of other artists inspired by the beautiful landscapes of [East Anglia](#).



Join [Richard](#) and [Margaret Heathcote](#) exploring the East Anglia of Richard's youth, where he first gained an abiding love of landscape, garden history and heritage architecture.

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