

A Few Days in Norfolk

(August 2009)

The East Anglian county of Norfolk has the misfortune of being the popular butt of comedians' jokes about in-breeding and all that follows, with references to meeting people with extra fingers on their hands, or the one I heard the other day about the guy who stands up at a Norfolk wedding reception and says, *"It falls upon me to say a few words, as father of the bride and groom.."*

Some of my ancestry is rooted in Norfolk, so perhaps that explains something about the person who is Lionel Beck.

Anyway we decided to spend a few days vacation in Norfolk during August.

It's a commonly held belief that the county is entirely flat, but this is not true. Towards the northern part of the county it endeavours to reach the giddy height of 350 ft above sea level, and there is an abundance of rounded contours and shady valleys - and that was just the frontal region of the waitress in the [Red Lion pub in Stiffkey](#) - not, incidentally, the reason for this curious village name. (In the 16th Century it was know as **Stewkey**).



Red Lion Pub, Stiffkey

We had very pleasant Bed & Breakfast accommodation in [Church Cottage](#) situated at the eastern extremity of Stiffkey. The local pub – the aforementioned *Red Lion* – sits at the western extremity of the village, so we had a daily 15-minute walk to this hostelry for our evening dinner, pints of local ale, bottles of not-so-local wine, followed by a 20-minute stagger back later on.



Church Cottage – our B&B in Stiffkey

The **A149** is a narrow, winding, bumpy road from **Kings Lynn** to **Cromer** and follows the line of the north Norfolk coast passing through a number of quaintly-named villages, such as *Burnham Overy*, *Stiffkey*, *Wells-next-the-Sea*, *Cley-next-the-Sea*, and *Salthouse*. This so-called main road is sometimes only 3 yards wide, especially through the villages, in which there is a 20 mph speed imposed. One would indeed be hard pressed to drive any faster than 20 mph without crashing into an oncoming car, bus or lorry whilst perhaps simultaneously mowing down one or two of the pedestrians clinging to the edge of the road for dear life in the absence of footpaths).



The A149 entering the east end of Stiffkey (one of the wider sections!)

(Note the flint-stone walls, common to most of the buildings in the area)

As we were staying next door to the Parish Church I learned that in the early part of the 20th century the **Vicar of Stiffkey** gained some notoriety by devoting much of his time to “helping” some of the “fallen women” of London (though one may conjecture it might have been the women doing the helping rather than the Vicar). In the fullness of time it was *his* turn to be defrocked and he ran off and joined a circus, whereupon he was subsequently eaten by a lion. (As it says on the *Red Lion* Web Site it was the vicar's other's missionary position that got him into trouble.)

What a way to live .. what a way to die!

This part of Norfolk contains the most magnificent acreage of sandy beaches and salt marshes, so that at some points you can sit on the beach whilst the tide is out and the sea is hardly visible in the distance. Anyone who watched the [TV fictional drama series called *Kingdom*](#) (about a country solicitor) starring Stephen Fry, will have seen those very beaches. The harbour shots were made in the town of *Wells-by-the-Sea* and the town centre where *Kingdom's* offices were situated was in fact the (inland) town of *Swaffham*. It was all meant to be the sametown of course, but when filming in *Swaffham* they dubbed on a sound track of seagulls!



The beach at Wells-next-the-Sea

In my usual train-nerdy fashion I ensured that our visit didn't go without a visit to the [North Norfolk Railway](#) – a heritage railway running steam trains between *Sheringham* and *Holt* – a distance of about 10 miles. It's a pleasant ride, with some splendid views of the sea. There are examples at both ends of the line of the pettiness and short-sighted attitudes that attended the infamous [Dr. Beeching](#) closures of thousands of miles of branch lines in the 1960s.

At the **Holt** end, the line was torn up (and replaced by a road), to a point one mile out of town. So when the **NNR** was formed by the usual band of enthusiastic volunteers and donors they had to construct a new station at the truncated end of the line (in 1988).

At the **Sheringham** end, about 75 yards of track that crossed the main street by level crossing, was torn up; meanwhile, on the other side of the road the national network was retained and a new platform constructed. So now we have the ridiculous situation where the **NNR** run heritage trains southwest from the *original* Sheringham Station, and on the other side of the road, **National Express** are running trains south-east from the *new* Sheringham Station on the national network. There is now a big fund-raising effort going on with a view to re-building the level crossing and joining up the two tracks again. They have all the permissions, now they just need the money.



Sheringham Station (NNR)



Train from Sheringham arriving at Holt Station

Being a mile out of town when you arrive at Holt turns out to be not such a problem because some enterprising old guy is running a shuttle service to and from the town using a 44-year old London Transport [Routemaster](#) named “*The Holt Flyer*”.



RM2151 Routemaster at Holt Station (& Pauline at the rear)

Why have I mentioned the RM serial number? This was a fun ride for me; when I was about 13 I used to travel to school on these buses, and I can say that I rode on **RM1**. So what? Well, as boys were actually excited by seeing a brand new bus design and, better still, riding on the first one.

The other railway we visited was the [Wells & Walsingham Light Railway](#). This is further testament to the eccentricity and persistence of the typical English nut-case .. in this instance a retired Naval Commander who decided about 20 years ago to buy up a length of old British Rail track bed between Wells and Walsingham and construct a **10¼-inch gauge** railway between the two places.

(I am puzzled by the strange logic dictating the widths of railway tracks. Why 10¼ inches for God's sake?! What's wrong with plain 11 inches, or better still, 12 inches? And the “**Standard Gauge**” railway is 4 feet 8 ½ inches. I believe Stephenson based that on the spacing between colliery wagon wheels when he built the Stockton & Darlington Railway. Most “**Narrow Gauge**” railways are 3 feet 6 inches.)

Anyway, **10¼ ins.** puts the *Wells & Walsingham* into the *Miniature Railway* class so far as I can see.



"Norfolk Hero" pulling into Wells Station



On the WWLR half way to Walsingham

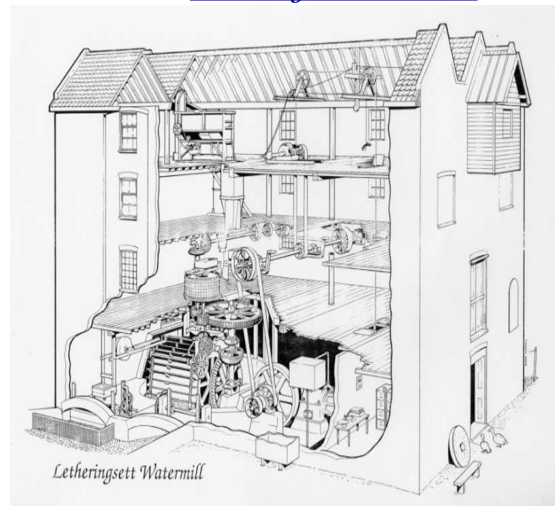
OK, so this thing is a lot of fun for the first couple of hundred yards, but "The Commander" laid **4 miles** of track in a straight line between Wells and Walsingham, and about 60% of it is in a shallow cutting. Now, a shallow cutting with a standard train is not something you'd notice, but when you are sitting on a miniature train you can see nothing but the cutting. So, if you are into being up close and personal with grass, nettles, brambles, and assorted bits of hedging, whilst trundling along with a head full of soot at 8 mph in a confined space on a bumpy track then this is surely the ride for you! And of course you have to come back, so that's a staggering 8 miles on a toy train. (Oh by the way, the Commander's still in charge, and he's now 87.)

We followed up our ride on the Commander's express with a visit to the [Letheringsett Watermill](#)



Letheringsett Watermill

©Joe Bridge www.joebridge.co.uk



©www.norfolk Mills.co.uk

This is another fine example of enterprise and a certain amount of dogged eccentricity and determination, this time by one Mike Thurlow and his wife Marion.

At the time of the Domesday book, 580 water mills were recorded in Norfolk, including one at Letheringsett but there were no windmills. By the 19th century there were only about 80 or 90 watermills still able to work. The red brick mill here now was built in 1802. It is the last remaining watermill in Norfolk to produce flour.

Mike and Marion Thurlow took over the mill in 1987 and restored the mill to working order and it is now an award winning tourist attraction.

A speciality wheat, Spelt is milled here at Letheringsett. Originally introduced to Britain by the Romans, Spelt is higher in vitamin B and protein and other wheat, and most wheat sensitive people can tolerate Spelt flour in their diet. Spelt flour is only one of the many different types of flour, dried fruit and nuts that can be purchased in the mill shop.

It's now a successful working water-powered mill with traditional gearing, millstones, etc., turning out large volumes of flours, made from wheat grown on local farms, for the specialist food market. They don't owe anybody anything.

No visit to this area would be complete without calling in a *Branthill Farm*, near Wells-next-the-Sea, where you will find a [Blue Ale Shop](#) selling at least 50 different kinds of bottle-conditioned ales brewed by Norfolk Breweries from barley grown on this and other local farms.

Malthouse Bitter

I like Norfolk. I feel at home there.



Waiting for the toy train