

NTS-LMC Spring Tour 2022: Suffolk

It may be several centuries since the English imprisoned Mary, Queen of Scots, but the practice of holding Scots captive has not entirely died out – or so it seemed as we sat in our coach looking at the padlocked gates of the National Trust's Melford Hall. We were the last visitors of the day. Appropriately, it was a young woman curator, herself a Scot who had previously worked for the NTS in Aberdeenshire, who released us.

But Melford Hall was not the first visit of this year's Spring Tour to Suffolk, which began in the quaint town of Lavenham, once made wealthy by the production of pretty 'Lavenham Blue' woollen cloth. But, when fashions changed, the town, with its half-timbered buildings, became the time-capsule of medieval and Tudor England that we see today.

In nearby Sudbury, silk manufacture has been established for over 200 years, using yarn imported from China. Intending to promote English silk production, King James VI and I mistakenly imported the mulberry trees still to be found in some gardens. But these are the black-fruited variety; silk worms eat only white mulberries. To our surprise, we learned that the town remains



the silk capital of England, producing high quality furnishing fabrics, including those used in the restoration of Windsor Castle. During our walking tour, we also saw Thomas Gainsborough's childhood home in the course of a £10 million restoration project, including the construction of a new gallery to display some 60 of his paintings. We followed this with a relaxing cruise on the River Stour, lined with willows, before having lunch at a riverside inn, where our group photograph was taken.

Another walking tour, this time around Bury St Edmunds, introduced us to the town's illustrious history, from the part it played in persuading King John to sign Magna Carta to hosting pilgrims at the shrine of St Edmund. For 500 years, he was the patron saint of England jointly with St George and, pre-Reformation, the town's Abbey was the third largest in Europe after Milan and Seville. Only the ruins remain today, but in the Abbey's place has risen a Cathedral, the Millennium Tower of which was completed as recently as 2005. Built of Lincolnshire limestone, and outlined against a blue sky, it looked magnificent, viewed from the Rose Garden. Our walk ended at the elegant Regency Theatre Royal – the National Trust's only theatre – inspired by the Greco-Roman theatre in Taormina in Sicily.



For us, the fun came in sitting in the boxes wearing hats of the period and, less pleasantly, in being offered scent bottles to sniff the range of odours given off by audiences of the time!

At the Horseracing Museum in Newmarket, the high wrought iron gates silently opened to admit us. Here, we learned about the retraining of former racehorses which, just like people reaching retirement, need a bit of a rest before learning new skills. On display in Palace House, the former sporting palace and stables of King Charles II, are paintings of horses by such eminent artists as George Stubbs and Sir Alfred Munnings, himself a Suffolk man.

After a busy few days, Sunday gave us time to relax in two very different gardens. The tranquil, well-stocked gardens at Fuller's Mill are set in woodland on the banks of a small river. Created over 50 years by their former owner, they have now passed to Perennial, a charity dedicated to helping those who work in horticulture and their families in times of need. In complete contrast are the long herbaceous borders, maze and rose garden at Helmingham Hall, a Tudor manor house, completely surrounded by a wide moat.



The final day of the Tour took us from Ickworth, where the National Trust cares for the collection of elaborate silver tableware and some



Gainsborough portraits, to Woodbridge. We were on our way to Sutton Hoo, but first had the opportunity to visit a warehouse on the quayside where a replica of the 90-foot



Anglo Saxon burial ship is under construction. The story of the ship's discovery has, of course, been made famous by the recent film 'The Dig'. While the original objects are on display in the British Museum, at the site itself an excellent exhibition includes reconstructions of some of the exquisite finds. We were also able to see a temporary exhibition which provides a read-across to similar objects discovered more recently as part of the Staffordshire Hoard.

Our Spring Tour had taken us across the gentle countryside of Suffolk to a variety of places whose history spans a millennium. Clearly, this is a county with much to offer the visitor.

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