

A weekend in... Orford, Suffolk

For the last few miles of the drive into the small Suffolk town of Orford we keep the headlights on full beam. It is pitch black and eerie, and there's no need to dim them — no car comes in the opposite direction along the twisting road through Rendlesham Forest. Then we pull up into Orford to find the local shop is shut. No one is about. A kiosk on one side of the main square offers newspapers, magazines and cards — it's an "honesty newsagent"; to buy anything you must put money in a safe box. "Please do not take papers without paying," says a polite sign.

It does not take long to leave the big bad world behind on a weekend away on this remote, marshy stretch of the Suffolk coast — if you travel outside the peak summer months, when the hordes descend. And that's exactly the appeal of an out-of-season trip: Orford and its environs may be a mere 12 miles northeast of Ipswich, yet the area feels far removed from the bustle of the county capital.

We are staying in a converted barn in the nearby village of Butley, close to the Oyster Inn pub. It's a great base for dipping into the various delights of Orford and the surrounding area, with its many castles, Anglo-Saxon burial mounds, coastline walks, sleepy villages, music festivals — and UFOs.

Yes, UFOs. More of those later. For now, we're at Orford Castle, which dominates one end of the town and was built by Henry II between 1165 and 1173 to keep an eye on troublesome East Anglian barons.

It's a short walk from the honesty newsagent and it is set in a circular tower. Run by English Heritage, inside it has a series of fascinating display cabinets, including Roman coins dating from the time of Emperor Claudius (AD41-54), neolithic flint knives and pieces of metal from a Zeppelin shot down over a nearby farm in June 1917.

A booklet explains the history and tells the tale of an unusual local legend: a merman is said to have been captured in nearby waters and held in the castle in Henry II's time. Passages lead to chambers with arrow slits and spiral steps curl upwards to rooftop battlements with sweeping views across the ten mile-long shingle spit of Orford Ness to the sea.

This spit was once owned by the Ministry of Defence and was where radar was developed in the 1930s before becoming a base for the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment. Now it's Orford Ness National Nature Reserve, overseen by the National Trust, and is home to hares, Chinese water deer (rather odd-looking creatures) and peregrine falcons — as well as the derelict remains of old military buildings.

Historical sights come thick and fast as we explore the little lanes of this part of the Suffolk coast. To see where Henry II's tricky barons lived, we drive about 14 miles northeast to



investigate Framlingham Castle — bigger than the one at Orford and with a vertigo-inducing path around its high battlements above a moat. One of the barons here, Hugh Bigod, had taken part in the Anarchy during the reign of King Stephen, Henry II's predecessor. The Bigod family had run much of Suffolk at the time; hence Henry's decision to take action and build Orford Castle.

We visit the mysterious Anglo-Saxon burial mounds at Sutton Hoo, about ten miles west of Orford; discovered in 1939 and dating from the 6th and 7th centuries. The 90ft ship in one of the mounds was the richest burial found in northern Europe; it's now in the British Museum but the National Trust displays at Sutton Hoo explain what was dug up. There's a pleasant café for a rest after walking round the mounds, plus a good little second-hand bookshop.

Another day we head to Snape Maltings, just north of Orford, where Benjamin Britten spotted the potential of a large 19th-century malthouse on the banks of the gently meandering River Alde as a venue for a concert hall for his hugely popular Aldeburgh Festival (held each year in June). Britten lived close by in Aldeburgh. The concert hall is in the village of Snape and was opened by the Queen in 1967. It's surrounded by quirky antique shops, arts and craft shops and even has a pub (the Plough & Sail is a great place to unwind in front of one of the open fires).

Orford itself is not short of watering holes. We eat excellent fish and chips in the low-ceilinged bar of The Jolly Sailor, down by the quay on the River Alde. But our favourite pub is the Kings Head, on a corner near the village shop, with its lovely wood-burning fire, chatter of locals and free Yorkshire puddings with gravy on Sunday afternoon (after the regular service has finished). What a great idea.

It's here that my brother and I buy a £2 map from behind the bar, covering walking paths in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths area of outstanding natural beauty. And so we set off the next day on a 13-mile hike from Butley, via Chillesford, Iken and Snape to Aldeburgh, passing through pine forests, pig farms, fields of turf (for garden centres), marshes and mudflats. We are exhausted when we reach the pebble beach at Aldeburgh and celebrate with a pint at the cosy little Ye Olde Cross Keys pub, which backs on to the beach. Oh yes, and the

UFOs? On December 27, 1980, US Air Force patrolmen spotted strange lights coming from a "conical object about the size of car" by RAF Woodbridge, within Rendlesham Forest. The Forestry Commission provides pamphlets covering a "UFO trail" through the spooky woodland. With its alien visitors, mermen, ancient burial sites, honesty newsagents and medieval castles, this corner of Suffolk is bursting with intrigue — perfect for a winter getaway.

Tom Chesshyre

Need to know

Where to stay

The Kings Head in Orford has double rooms from £100 B&B (thekingsheadorford.co.uk). Suffolk Cottage Holidays has a week's stay for ten people at Butley Barn from about £2,600 (suffolkcottageholidays.com)

Further information

Visit Suffolk (visitsuffolk.com), the Suffolk Coast (thesuffolkcoast.co.uk). For fishing trips try Orford Marine Services (orfordrivertrips.co.uk)

The keep at Orford Castle. Inset left: the lighthouse at Orford Ness



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