

Walking into a LOST WORLD

Mike and Clare Trippitt, and their Clumber spaniel Farley, explore the forests and marshes around mysterious Dunwich

WORDS ♦ PHOTOS: Mike Trippitt

Farley lives life in the present, in the here and now. For him, a walk is defined by what he can see, eat, smell, and chase. So, I wondered, what would he make of our choice for a day out? Because for my wife, Clare, and I it was about the past.

Not only were we going to Dunwich for a good walk, but also to understand and appreciate all that has vanished. With his brain less advanced than ours, I'm sure our Clumber spaniel would struggle with the notion of going to see something that is no longer there.

Dunwich's beach car park, with its renowned cafe and toilets, is near perfection. It is also 'free', although a notice above a stone-built 'honesty box' invites donations "for Local Charities and Church". I smiled. Never so gladly had I parted with a few pounds for a day's parking.

St James Street from the 17th century Ship Inn, past Dunwich Museum, to St James Church is the compact heart of the village. The ruinous walls of the Leper Hospital in the churchyard, and the vast ruins of the Franciscan priory we had seen driving into the village are the only remains of Dunwich's medieval past. We would learn more from the museum later.

Over the Dunwich River on the Westleton Road we joined a bridleway at Dingle Marsh Barns and followed the well-marked trail between Dingle Marshes and Dunwich Forest. Our path



Potton Hall

was to turn into the forest after a half-mile and follow tracks west through the trees before looping back south to Westleton.

Among the shelter of the evergreens several ramblers and dog owners were out enjoying this quiet spot. Although roads and the sea are less than a mile away the sense of isolation was immediate. Grassy lanes muffled our footsteps and it was hard to resist talking in a whisper. But peace was disturbed when Farley spotted something ahead.

Aggression is not part of a Clumber's make up. Farley's a friendly dog who likes all living creatures. Except squirrels. What they've done to offend him we do not know, but they are his sworn enemy. Spotting one on the path about 40 metres ahead, he pursued it furiously. But the rodent saw him coming

and escaped up a tree. His forlorn whimpering betrayed his frustration. One day he'll understand the futility of chasing squirrels.

Our path zigzagged through the forest, leading to a clearing in slightly lower ground. Ahead, an impressive building with goldfinch-yellow rendered walls under a deep rust coloured roof stood in manicured grounds. A white conservatory, black Tudor-style windows and a dusky pink outhouse contrasted with surrounding green and brown. We had arrived at Potton Hall.

As well as being a spa retreat, the hall's converted barn contains a renowned, state-of-the-art recording studio and a Steinway piano. Dame Felicity Lott and Tasmin Little are among the classical artists who have recorded here.

'His whimpering betrayed his frustration. One day he'll understand the futility of chasing squirrels'

Emerging from the trees, I reflected on the four miles we had walked. We'd briefly followed a metalled road, and for the remainder we'd enjoyed a mix of firm, easy, wide tracks, heath and grassy paths, almost completely flat, and all sheltered from the prevailing wind. Dunwich Forest is an excellent place to walk.

The last section of the public footpath into Westleton dissects fields full of pigs. The young housed in one field and, in





ABOVE:
Farley and Mike in
Dunwich forest

LEFT:
Farley takes
a breather at
Dunwich

another, larger, older sows were stied in corrugated shelters. Along the fence line, porkers snuffled in troughs and rootled around the ground.

Five fat, slovenly sows huddled on a bed of straw in an open-ended sty and I thought of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Was it only grunting, or could I hear the chant? "Four legs good; two legs bad."

According to William White's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk*, published in 1855,

Westleton had "993 souls and 6,103 acres of land". The population has declined to about two-thirds of that now. There are certainly more pigs than people.

The village has a popular tearoom, a wonderful secondhand bookshop, and a 14th century thatched church. The village hall was formerly a National School, built in 1842 at a princely cost of £430.

We arrived at the dog-friendly White Horse pub ready for a drink and something to eat after ▶



our five-mile hike. “So what’s the village really like,” I asked Kate, behind the bar. “Quiet, but with a great community spirit,” she replied. “I love village life.”

Our lunch was good, well served and reasonably priced – just what we needed on an early spring day. As we stood up to leave, I thanked Kate for our food and her conversation. I put on my coat, said goodbye and made for the door.

“Can I ask you to pay your bill before you go?” she said politely. Mortified, I pulled out my wallet quickly to hide my embarrassment. “I can’t believe I’ve forgotten to pay,” I said,

somewhat flustered. “I must be getting old.” Cheerily, Kate said: “No problem,” accepting the innocence of my faux pas. At least we hadn’t left without paying. Farley would be no match for a pursuing police dog.

The walk back to Dunwich over Westleton Heath was less than half the distance of that through the forest. The sun was breaking through for the first time as we got back by mid afternoon. Though Dunwich’s coastal location, forest, heathland and simple facilities are enough to draw visitors, its extraordinary past gives it a singular appeal.

“Dunwich has a remarkable

history as a Roman settlement, Saxon city and a medieval port,” says Jane Hamilton, curator of Dunwich Museum. “It was one of the largest trading centres in England and was of a similar geographical size to medieval London. There were 4,000 residents.” The sea and the weather have shaped its fortunes. “A shingle spit created a deep water harbour at Dunwich,” Jane explains, “but in the 13th century it was hit by many storms.

“In 1286, during a great storm, part of the town was destroyed and material from the spit washed into the river at the Dunwich end, rendering

ABOVE:
Resident ducks
are part of village
life at Westleton



the harbour inaccessible to large vessels. Dunwich went into decline.” Over the centuries, the harbour and town crumbled into the sea. Little is left of its two hospitals, three monasteries and, reputedly, 14 churches.

“The ruins of the former port and town are now in the sea bed extending up to a mile offshore,” says Jane. “The last church to fall was that of All Saints.

“The cliff reached the ruined church in 1904 and the tower at its west finally fell in 1922.” The museum, run entirely by volunteers, tells the whole story, with a model of the medieval port

‘The ruins of the former port are now in the sea bed... up to a mile offshore’

as its centrepiece. It highlights just how much of this coast has been lost to erosion. Dunwich really is Britain’s lost city.

Our walk ended at the beach. There were miles of shingle, the odd fishing boat and Sizewell power station in the distance. Looking east under blue skies, Farley could see only the expanse of the North Sea. But my view was better for knowing what else is out there... somewhere. ♦



Need to know

DISTANCES - Total 7.20miles

Beach car park – Dunwich Forest **0.9miles**

.....
Dunwich Forest – Westleton Road **1.1miles**

.....
Westleton Rd – White Horse, Westleton (via Potton Hall and B1125) **2.35miles**

.....
Westleton – Westleton Heath **1mile**

.....
Westleton Heath – Dunwich **1.85miles**

DUNWICH MUSEUM

Open daily 11.30am to 4.30pm
April to October, and 2pm to 4pm weekends in March.

Dogs not allowed inside.

LOCAL VETS

Leiston Veterinary Clinic
T: 01728 833566

Fromus Veterinary Group
T: 01728 602599

Wangford Veterinary Clinic
T: 01502 578999

Eagle Veterinary Group
T: 01986 873139

SUFFOLK DOG WALK IN ASSOCIATION WITH LETHERINGHAM MILL COTTAGES

One cannot help being ‘wowed’ by the saga of Suffolk’s own Atlantis. The ‘lost’ city of Dunwich and all its mystery tells a very special story to its visitors, and dramatic views of the sea and the remains of the abbey serve as a reminder of the greatness of this part of the world.

We share part of this history here at Letheringham Water Mill. There was a mill at Letheringham mentioned in the Domesday Book and the current mill dates back to 1740, ceasing operations in 1927.

We have worked hard to lovingly restore the mill to its former glory and guests in our Riverside Cottage can even see the mill wheel through an illuminated viewing

gallery from within their rural hideaway.

Our four cottages all have their own tales to tell, nestled below the water mill and surrounded by the restored gardens bordering the meandering River Deben.

We hope you enjoy the wander through Dunwich. Happy April!

Jacqui Fairey and Richard Gooding

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