

Simply Fen-tastic

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Standing proud . . . part of Ely Cathedral, a landmark well worth visiting

Explore Ely from a luxury B&B, which also boasts a superb bathside view of the cathedral!

Words: Roger Hermiston & Eileen Wise

You can travel to the other side of the world – but all too often you can miss the little gems on your doorstep. Well, just 40 miles north in our case, a short hop over the Suffolk border to the attractive cathedral city of Ely and the stark yet mysterious fenland that surrounds it.

We wanted to stay somewhere in the area with a feel of the past that could match the rich and varied historical character of Ely. So we looked for inspiration to Wolsey Lodges, an organisation with over 200 properties on their books who are well known for having some incredible houses. The owners open up their homes to guests for a truly enjoyable and luxurious bed and breakfast experience (and many provide delicious dinners too) in some of the most beautiful houses in Britain.

We chose The Old Hall at Stuntney just a mile outside Ely. It was once the home of Oliver Cromwell's mother (more of him later) and in this beautifully restored Jacobean manor house it's easy to imagine how life must have been back then.

Our hosts were Alison and Anthony Morbey whose family have lived in The Old Hall since 1860. On arrival Alison greeted us warmly and sat us down for a friendly chat over a welcome cup of tea and some of her delicious homemade lemon drizzle cake.

We were lucky to be staying in the bridal suite with its comfortable four-poster bed and all the special luxuries you'd expect to find in a five star hotel – lovely scented toiletries, fluffy towels and robes. The room also has the most stunning uninterrupted views of Ely Cathedral in all its magnificence – in fact, we could enjoy the same view



Ancient and modern . . . The Old Hall drawing room, complete with roaring fire

from our bath too!

In all there are five delightful bedrooms at The Old Hall, each very different in design and layout, but all en suite with stylish bathrooms with decadent baths and separate state of the art showers.

The Morbey's daughter Alex, who has worked in the leisure industry for some years, recently returned home to oversee The Old Hall's ever-expanding wedding business. Most weekends the house is fully booked for weddings, both small and large. The parties come not just from the East Anglian region, but also increasingly from further afield as the reputation has grown.

But Alison emphasises that they never entertain B&B guests at the same time as a wedding party as they know they are individual – and often longstanding – customers like to experience the tranquillity of the old house.

The ample grounds, with lakes and



Look out from The Old Hall and view Ely Cathedral in all its splendour

woods, offer a lovely, peaceful stroll. We were lucky enough to come across a group of big playful hares enjoying the sunshine – a wonderful sight, but not uncommon, as this delightful animal is the principal feature of the hall's wildlife. For eating out we chose The White Pheasant pub, only a 10-minute drive

away in the village of Fornham. There we enjoyed a really delicious meal full of locally sourced food in a cosy, friendly atmosphere: the Cromer crab in sweet corn and lime was a particular highlight. This excellent little restaurant has won a prized AA Two Rosette Award for Culinary Excellence and fully deserves all the accolades that have come its way.

Exploring the area a few miles from The Old Hall led us into a chance encounter with a legendary TV figure. We had just returned from a pleasant walk around Wicken Fen when we stumbled across an elderly man in a straw hat crouched by the bank of the lode (river), apparently

talking to himself.

He was surrounded by a large group of people, including a camera crew, and Eileen jokingly said: "It's probably David Attenborough". We moved closer and one glance at the side profile confirmed that it was indeed the famous documentary-maker, not mumbling away to no-one in particular, but in fact rehearsing one of his exemplary scripts about dragonflies for his latest TV series.

Wicken Fen, the National Trust's oldest nature reserve, has the beauty and tranquillity - and an extraordinary range of 8,500 species - which attracts professional and amateur naturalists alike. It's a wonderful day out, glimpsing colourful damselflies and moths on your ramble, training binoculars on marsh harriers and kingfishers from the four hides, and catching a glimpse of the beautiful, rare Konik ponies.

Amongst Ely's many places of interest we found a real gem of a museum lying in the shadow of the cathedral - Oliver Cromwell's House, where the Parliamentarian leader lived from 1636-1646. Step inside the attractive, half-timbered building and you get a real feel, throughout the eight rooms, for the life of a middle-class family in those times.

Mrs Cromwell's well-stocked kitchen, with her inventive recipes, is especially interesting, and the spooky atmosphere of Oliver's death bedroom completes the tour. And, having absorbed the history on your journey, you're invited to take part in a vote on whether Cromwell was 'hero' or villain'. On the day we went, there was a narrow margin for the former!

A final mention should go to a jewel of a bookshop, Topping and Co on Ely High Street. Independent booksellers may be struggling in many parts of the country, but they will continue to find a place in the community if they provide the atmosphere, stock and excellent service found here.

The Old Hall, Stuntney, near Ely

www.wolseylodges.com

www.theoldhallely.co.uk

Tel: 01353 663275

Doubles from £60 per person including breakfast

The White Pheasant, Fordham.

Tel: 01638 720414

www.whitepheasant.com

Wicken Fen Nature Reserve

www.wicken.org.uk

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Fragrant . . . The Primrose Room at the Packhorse Inn, Moulton

A real chic retreat

Richard Bryson stays at the Packhorse Inn, Moulton

There's probably no better time to visit a restaurant or pub than when it has just won an award.

Just before our stay The Packhorse was chosen "Best Food Pub" for the East Anglia & East Midlands region in The Great British Pub Awards. As a consequence getting a table this autumn may have just got a little trickier.

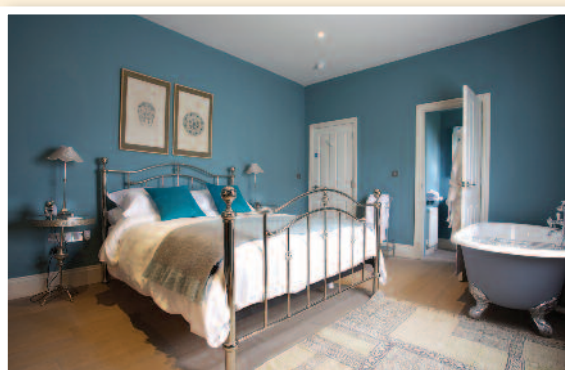
It's easy to see why the Packhorse has made its mark so swiftly. The manager Hayley Lee, and her chef husband Chris, won accolades at the Bildeston Crown and now they are developing this inn into a rather special West Suffolk destination.

As the award indicates the food here is very good indeed, both inventive and flavoursome, but more about the menu later. What about the rooms?

Just nine months after opening its doors, following a total refurbishment, it has doubled its number of guest bedrooms. All open onto a terrace, in this former Coach House and they are named Kennett, Lark, Ouse and Stour after four of the rivers which flow nearby. The rooms are all en suite and benefit from the luxury of underfloor heating. The stylish décor has been the inspiration of the owner, Philip Turner's wife Amanda Turner. Situated on the ground floor, the new additions are suitable for disabled access and are also designated "dog friendly" with just a small charge for the additional cleaning required.

We stayed in the Primrose room above the restaurant and found it to be very comfortable, light and spacious.

As the picture at the top of the page shows it has the now almost obligatory bath in the room and an assortment of distressed furniture, including an impressive wall mirror. We loved the views (this is a ♦♦



The Folly Room. The four Main House rooms are named after the hills surrounding Moulton

❖ surprisingly hilly part of Suffolk) which looked over rooftops and also the village green, full of dog walkers on the evening of our visit and just right for a post prandial stroll. There is a lovely relaxed air about this inn - it looks as though it has its share of regulars popping in for an evening drink and a scattering of tourists too. We overheard Dutch voices on a nearby table in the restaurant



A view of the restaurant

which snakes its way around the bar. The menu is thoughtfully put together and from it we chose starters of half a dozen Dorset snails, garlic and parsley and salt cod fish finger, warm potato salad and parsley. A very minor gripe would be that there was barely any sign of a warm potato salad on the plate but overall both dishes impressed.

My main, Dublin Bay scampi, braised lettuce, minted peas with fries was a delight - posh scampi and chips you might call it but a lovely indulgence.

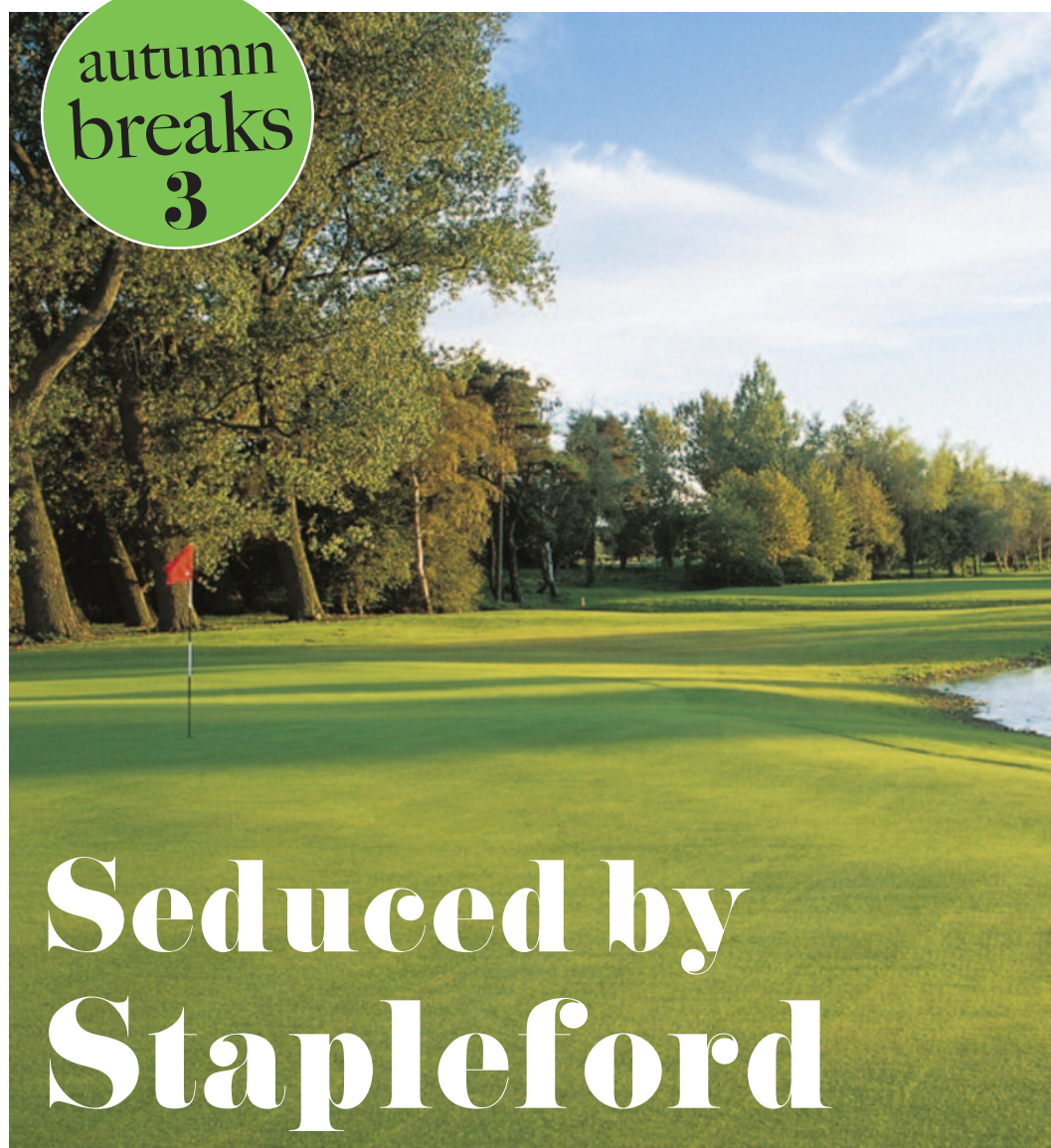
Whole grilled Norfolk lobster, béarnaise sauce, Jersey Royals and caesar salad on the other side of the table was equally rewarding. We shared some of the cheese board selection which also shows the chef's good taste.

All in all a real inn of repute that is crying out to be discovered.

■ **Sunday Sleepover** - Treat yourself to a night at The Packhorse Inn for only £75 a room. Enjoy lunch or dinner (Sunday menu) and stay in any of the rooms for just an additional £75 (2 sharing, breakfast included). This special offer is only valid until 28 September 2014 and so book early to avoid disappointment.

The Packhorse Inn, Bridge Street, Moulton, Newmarket, Suffolk, CB8 8SP
01638 751818 www.thepackhorseinn.com

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Seduced by Stapleford

Just an hour and a half's drive from West Suffolk, Stapleford Park Hotel offers great golf, a spa, plus landscaped grounds designed by Capability Brown

There was something not quite right with the view from our bedroom. We were looking out across the gardens of Stapleford Park Country House Hotel to the golf course beyond.

Along our eyeline we could see three or four holes but not a sign of a bunker. A little later one of the reception staff explained all. "Capability Brown wanted an uninterrupted view of the landscape so things like bunkers were not permissible." Golfers shouldn't become too complacent though... as the course drifts out of sight from the house you do find sand traps and there are some deep, tricky ones too. We had come for a weekend stay to play the 18 hole championship golf course, home of the PGA's newest tournament, The Handa Senior Masters. Situated in

Leicestershire, and on the borders of Rutland, I expected to find rolling countryside - this used to be prime hunting country in years gone by - but instead the course mainly stretches out across flat parkland.

That said the fairway on the first hole has no end of ridges and looks like a badly rolled carpet. Mind you the turf is of good quality so don't let my description put you off - and if you hit a good tee shot you will clear most of the humps.

If the first part of the course is rather open, requiring long hitting and accuracy to keep out of the rough, the middle and latter holes throw in some interesting challenges particularly those greens guarded by water. And once you are on the putting surface take care as the ball runs pretty quickly as we discovered.



Left: A pond guarding the 10th green at Stapleford Park and above, the impressive stone and thatch golf pavilion. Below: Stapleford Park Country House Hotel at night and a view of the restaurant



It's a real mix of a course, in some places it almost has a links feel then in other corners it is lush parkland. We played through several heavy rainshowers, necessitating frequent donning of waterproofs, so we had a slightly frustrating round but really enjoyed ourselves. When you finish on the 18th, wet through but still keen to play again that must be proof of a really good golf course.

The clubhouse, complete with thatched roof, is set apart from the main house but fits nicely into its surroundings. Built in the style of the old cottages on the estate, it houses the members' meeting room, pro-shop and changing rooms overlooking the 18th hole. It had a pleasant, no-standing-on-ceremony feel on the weekend we visited.

The brochure claims golf here is more exclusive than Wentworth but more accessible than Loch Lomond. Certainly the relaxed ambience is a plus point with players able to just turn up and play!

Just don't try and play this course if you are a real novice would be my only rider.



Winter weddings at Stapleford Park £7997 for 80 persons from Oct-Dec 2014 excluding bank holidays, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.
First quarter 2015 wedding £6997 for 80 persons, Jan-Mar 2014.

Stapleford Park, Stapleford, Nr. Melton
Mowbray, Leicestershire, LE14 2EF, England.
Tel: 01572 787000
information@stapleford.co.uk

Away from the course the hotel marries modern style with old fashioned charm. The two AA Rosette restaurant has a certain grandeur and the food is exceptional. Service was of the highest standard too. Incidentally the dining room is named after the famous Dutch born sculptor and wood carver Grinling Gibbons, who carved decorations in the hotel's mantelpiece. His work can also be seen at St Paul's Cathedral, Blenheim Palace and Hampton Court Palace. There are a variety of bedrooms to stay in, all highly individual, very comfortable and boasting rich fabrics and fine pieces of furniture. Ours, as previously mentioned, had views out over the grounds including one of several formal walled gardens which blend so well with the extensive, informal and natural gardens all set within Stapleford's magnificent woodlands. You don't hear a sound at night - it really is one of the most peaceful places I've stayed - and you can dream of playing a sub-par on that nearby course.

John Seery