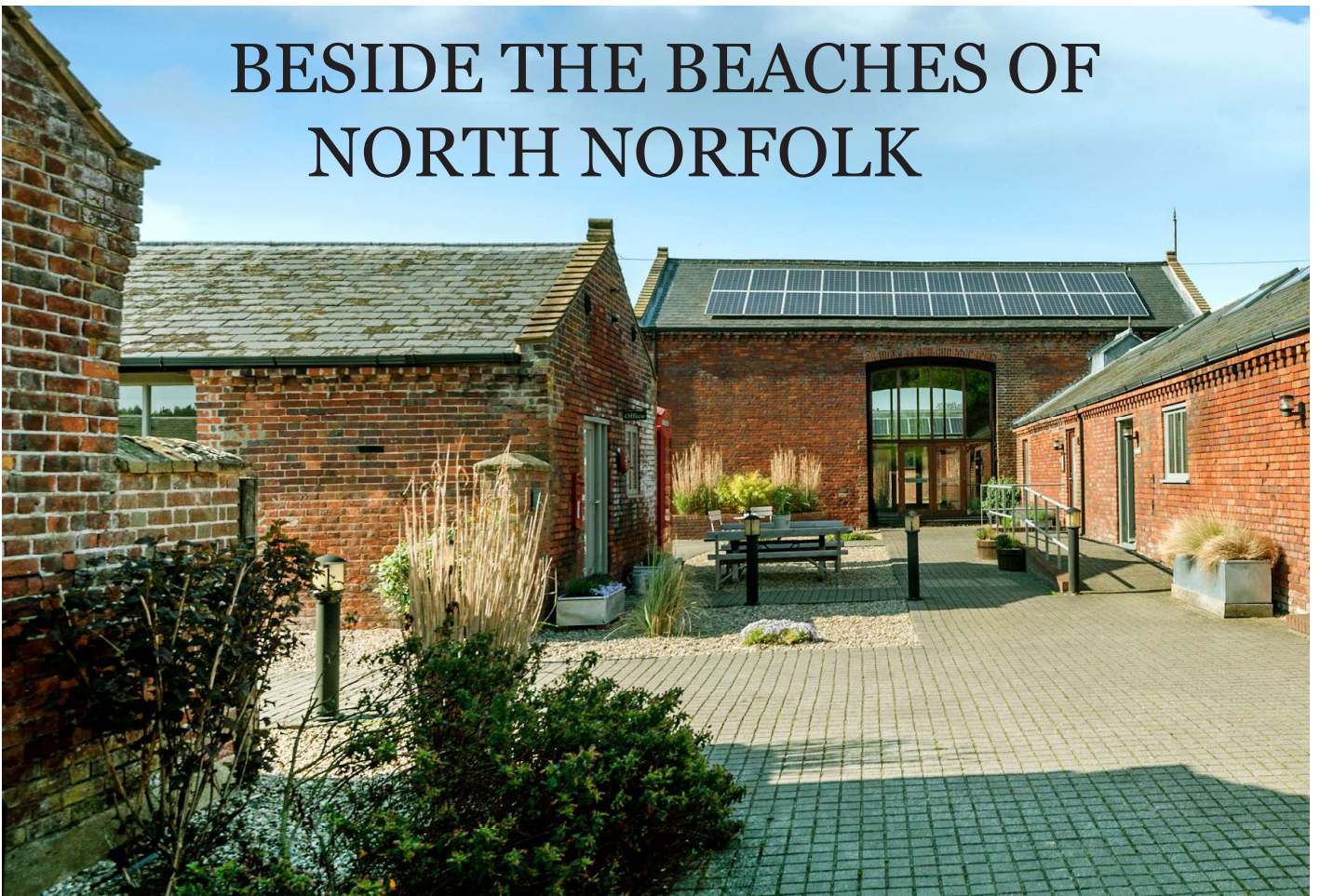


# BESIDE THE BEACHES OF NORTH NORFOLK



## ADAM JACOT DE BOINOD escapes into the English countryside

What reassuring familiarity – north Norfolk is charmingly redolent of yesteryear Britain: old-fashioned petrol pumps, village greens with telephone boxes and butchers alongside second-hand bookshops and links courses (at Brancaster and Cromer) overlooking sand dunes. The region equally offers children all the fun of Arthur Ransom's children's adventure tome, *Swallows and Amazons*, with boats to jump in and birds to spot as well as the traditional bucket-and-spade holiday on fabulously expansive beaches, salt marshes, dunes and scrubs.

I stayed just outside Fakenham, under three hours away and in such a delightful part of Norfolk close to the Royal Family's Sandringham. My self-accommodation felt just like a top hotel suite. Cranmer Cottages are a conversion from a former Victorian dairy farm into eight luxury cottages or eco barns. Mine was called 'Garden House', though most have avian titles such as Owl, Tern, Wagtail, Swallow and Coot: the smallest sleeping three and the largest eight.

The interior is slick, chic and homey, with a stylishly modern feel within its original framework. There are tasteful, coloured photographs of local beach scenes looking down over the luxuriating living space. The bedding is high-quality and in the kitchen everything is thoroughly thought through.

Concertina doors provide a seamless inside-outside opening onto a landscaped terrace, decked with lavender and bamboo and a barbecue all set within an original brick wall and overlooking a paddock-sized field beyond that's dotted with silver birches whose delicate leaves blow in the breeze. All very dreamy, de-stressing and enriching.

The cottages have shared use of an indoor swimming pool which is open throughout the year. It was once a threshing barn where out through its huge, oversized windows the wind took the chaff. It's a magnificent asset: fabulously warm, free of standard

chlorine and long enough in which to exercise properly.

The forward-thinking owners passionately support sustainability by reducing the impact on the environment with their own wind turbine, ground source heat pumps, solar panels and rainwater harvesting. Deep loops came up from underground to heat my Garden House and a biomass boiler recycled wood chips to stay carbon neutral. They've even planted 25,000 trees in the 175 acres that constitutes their land.

Local town Burnham Market has many charming boutiques: dress and food shops, as well as a second-hand bookshop into which I popped to discover a glossary of Norfolk words. But, in preparation for a hearty afternoon walk, I needed to 'yaffle': eat hungrily rather than 'pingle': play with my food. So where better than to enter The Jolly Sailors ([www.jollysailorsbrancaster.co.uk](http://www.jollysailorsbrancaster.co.uk)) run by the efficient and friendly Simon Parkin. It's on the main road going through Brancaster Staithe (a 'staithe' being a landing stage for loading and unloading cargo boats). Here I savoured prawns prepared in the eatery's very own smokehouse before diving into one of their homemade chocolate brownies. With a large garden for kids to run around in it suits all kinds and the vibe certainly lives up to its advertised motto of 'Eat, Drink and Be Jolly'.

The next day I drove east through Holt, a town with its fair share of boutiques, especially for interiors and antiques. At Byfords ([www.byfords.org.uk](http://www.byfords.org.uk)), Richard Knights prepared for me the poshest of picnics. It came in boxes: salads with the freshest and healthiest 'first of the season' dressed local crabs and then an indulgent box with fruit and cheese scones with butter, clotted cream and jams.

Though nicknamed 'very flat Norfolk' by Noel Coward, the northern stretch has a landscape of vast, flat, fecund fields and the greenest of its long avenues reflect mazy patterns on the road, reminiscent of recent Hockney works. There are vibrant shots of yellow rapeseed fields with hares hopping hares and alarmed pheasants. The churches typically have rounded towers and the vast majority of buildings are





distinctive with flint. Clouds scud across big blue skies and the sunsets are spectacular. For more see: [www.visitnorthnorfolk.com](http://www.visitnorthnorfolk.com)

On my beach walk from Cromer to Overstrand the waves discharged their burden in small helpings and the wind was brazing as I stumbled over sand and pebbles alike. Cromer is an honest and unspoilt seaside resort complete with a seafront, promenade and pier, with beach huts, ice-cream vans and surfing shops. It's all highly reminiscent of Betjeman's Cornwall, where along the beach golf balls appear from nowhere to compete with shells to satiate eager mudlarkers and metal detectors.

On the way back and beyond Holt is Letheringsett, home to The Kings Head ([www.kingsheadnorfolk.co.uk](http://www.kingsheadnorfolk.co.uk)) and a perfect place to which to repair and restore myself. Run by Jessie Petrie, the interior has cool and interesting antiquities such as old skis and hunting prints. Here I pondered over a menu offering the spoiling range of crispy tofu burger, a paprika-spiced aubergine, feta and preserved lemon quinoa salad or a swordfish steak with mango salad. I can particularly recommend their homemade cumin-spiced flatbread.

The next day I came to Holkham Beach. Here the waves unfurled continuously and relentlessly on the sandy strands. Down 'Lady Ann's Drive' I drove to walk onto what initially were marshes but, beyond and out of sight, I discovered where the magic was as I reached the broadest expanse of flat sand imaginable. Here in this lunar setting I wandered blissfully free.

I returned to Brancaster Staithe to eat at the White Horse ([www.whitehorsebrancaster.co.uk](http://www.whitehorsebrancaster.co.uk)). Scattered across its vast establishment are tables on the terrace, courtyard and marshside presented with different menus. The setting has gorgeous panoramic views over the marshes towards Scolt Head Island and the infinity beyond. Here the chef forages the sea beet (the ancestor to beetroot, sugar beet and swiss chard). The restaurant, ably run by general manager Rob Williamson, has inside lovely black-and-white pictures of fishermen beneath lampshades in the shape of lobster pots and lights employing nautical

pulleys.

On the terrace I was spoilt with Norfolk asparagus and soft-poached hen's egg as a starter before launching into and revelling in the 'seafood platter to share' consisting of 'North Sea' lobster, dressed Cromer crab, crayfish and prawn cocktail, 'Staithe Smokehouse' salmon, Brancaster oysters with shallot vinegar, saffron-pickled cockles, smoked mackerel, lemon mayo and sourdough. With it came Cobble Hill, the local wine, a crisp and fresh Bacchus grape white. What a magnificent lunch.

What's so good about self-accommodation is, as owner Lynne Johnson admits, the flexibility and choice to venture forth or stay put. She was keen to stress that 'what's special about all Premier Cottages ([www.premiercottages.co.uk](http://www.premiercottages.co.uk)), a group spread across Britain to which Cranmer Cottages belong, is that they're run by passionate owners like me who want to give the very best to their guests who all sign up to expect a similar level of experience wherever they go'. I must return soon.

#### Fact Box

Premier Cottages features almost 1,000 four- and five-star self-catering cottages across the UK. Properties range from small, romantic boltholes to large family-friendly country estates. The collection includes pet-friendly accommodation, baby-friendly properties and the widest range of accessible properties in the UK. Many holiday homes have on-site facilities like swimming pools, gyms, spas, indoor games rooms and children's play areas.

A week's stay in Cranmer Country Cottages' Garden House for up to six guests starts from £1,240 and a three night break starts from £909. ([www.premiercottages.co.uk](http://www.premiercottages.co.uk), 01328 823135)

