

THE PEDDARS WAY AND NORFOLK COAST PATH



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THE PEDDARS WAY AND NORFOLK COAST PATH

**130 MILE NATIONAL TRAIL – NORFOLK'S BEST
INLAND AND COASTAL SCENERY**

by Phoebe Smith

CICERONE

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Dedication

*For my Mum and Dad who were there when I took my
first steps on a much longer journey...*

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Neil without whom some of these amazing photos would never have appeared.

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Front cover: Feeling solid ground beneath boots as the path leaves the beach at Gramborough Hill (Stage 8)

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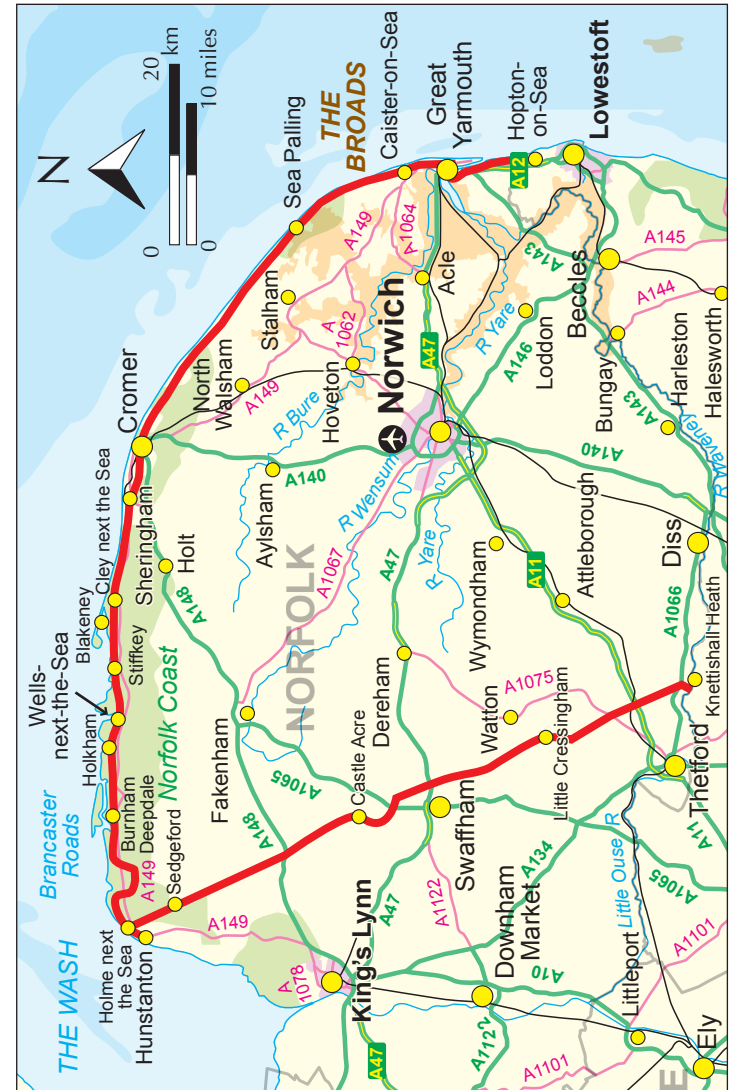
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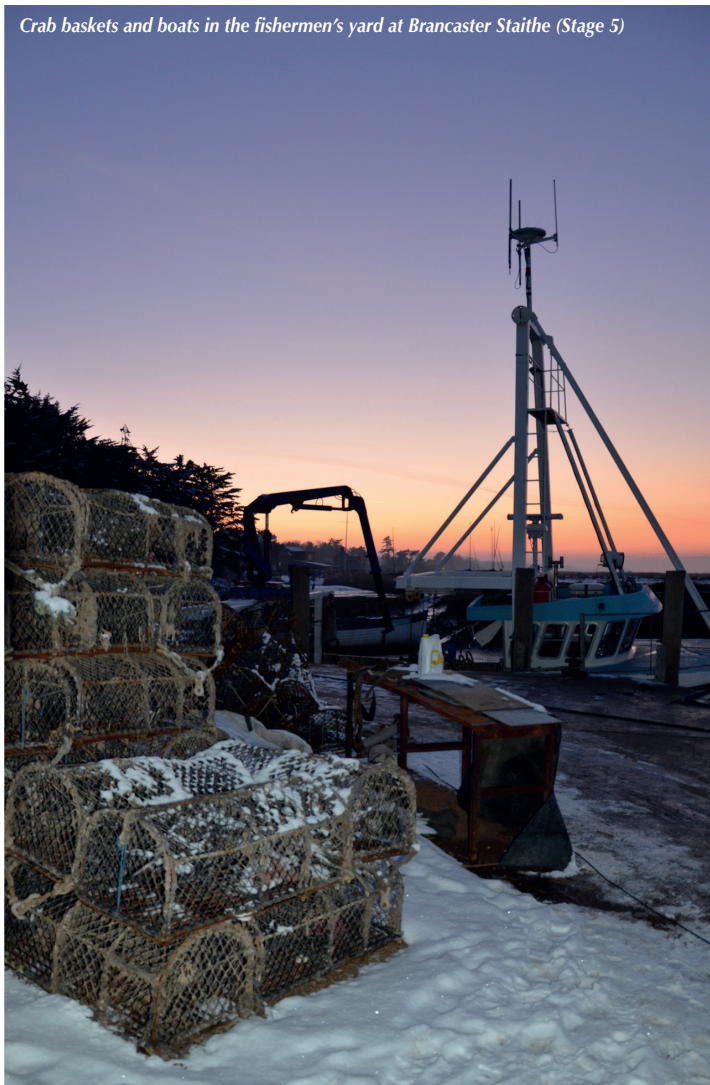
Footprints are soon swallowed up by the sea, as are parts of the Norfolk Coast Path between Cley next the Sea and Weybourne (Stage 8)

Route symbols on OS map extracts	Features on the overview map
route	County/Unitary boundary
start of route	Urban area
finish of route	National park
route direction	Forest Park/National Forest
	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

For OS legend see OS maps.



Crab baskets and boats in the fishermen's yard at Brancaster Staithe (Stage 5)



INTRODUCTION



The Norfolk Coast Path encounters cliffs at Weybourne (Stage 8)

Wilderness is something so many of us search for on our small island. Many will tell you that – if anywhere – it can be found in the mountainous hinterland of the Scottish Highlands; others will argue that, if you know where to look, it can be discovered within the southern extremities of Snowdonia. Few, if any, will try to convince you that it can reside here, in East Anglia. But it does.

The landscape through which the old Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path cleaves its very determined way is very special. Stand on Blakeney Point or on the edge of the beach at Holkham, or even the dunes of Holme next the Sea in the bracing wind, and you will feel how wild this stretch of coastline can truly be. And it's not just the landscape that can evoke

the feeling of unbridled wilderness. Despite an ever-growing population, this region is still one of the most unpopulated in the country. Take a break in the Breckland woods just minutes from the start of the route and you'll experience just how quiet, and how still, this eastern corner of Britain can be. Better yet, visit in the winter when the wind carries a frosting of snow that cakes the golden sand dunes in crisp white powder and ices the hedgerows with a dazzling coat of rime.

The significance of the route is borne out by its long history since the the invading Romans set the native Icení (whose ancestors had used it long before their captors arrived) the task of constructing part of it in AD61 under the gaze of ancient Bronze Age

tumuli. Indeed, even before then, people had lived under the big skies amid the saltmarshes, cliffs and sandy beaches for many millennia.

A combination of two separately designated paths, this 216km (133 mile) National Trail could certainly, above all others in the UK's network, be described as a walk of two halves. But that applies to more than just its physical demarcations. The route passes through remote landscapes as well as villages and seaside resorts, and can be as busy as it is peaceful, as wild as it is tame. Step into Hunstanton after treading the fields near Fring and Sedgeford and you'll feel as though you've entered a different world. Enjoy convenient fish and chips and a cup of tea in Sheringham after negotiating the crashing waves and falling shingle at Weybourne while spotting migrating birds swooping overhead, and you will

have had two mirror-opposite experiences within a period of hours.

On the Peddars Way, Roman roads make way for more modern tarmac affairs until you're plunged back into walkways lined with Scots pine. Picture-perfect chocolate-box villages lead you to vast clay fields smattered with lumps of white-coated flint and pockmarked with marl pits from our ancient farming past. Bronze Age tumuli and earthworks sit alongside 11th-century castle ruins as modern sculptures echo words from the past until, finally, you reach the sea.

Once at the coast Victorian resorts – complete with all the trimmings of striped deckchairs, chippies, donkeys and amusement arcades – vie for attention then, just as suddenly, peter out as the striped cliffs descend to the waves and rare birds swoop and dive overhead. Stunning untamed saltmarshes

attempt to lure you from the path as you make your way past open vistas of sparkling sand. Further along the route come wooden beach huts and family parties, followed by crumbling military remains from World War II and the wide open expanses of farmland dotted with de-sailed windmills, before reaching the piers and maritime trappings at Cromer and Great Yarmouth.

The true beauty of this walk lies in the variety of landscapes, architecture, history, wildlife, people and emotions encountered en route – a real roller-coaster ride from start to finish, which draws people back time and again.

GEOLOGY

Norfolk has a varied geological history spanning some 140 million years. Clay, sand, carstone (sandstone), chalk, flint and limestone are all encountered as the path traverses a landscape that was scoured and carved by a series of advancing and retreating glaciers during the last Ice Age.

The melting of the glaciers and subsequent reduction of pressure on the land mass resulted in a significant fall in sea level over 62 million years ago, leaving the area that is now Norfolk as dry land. More recently (two million years ago) incoming shallow seas deposited sediment – one of which is the Cromer Forest Bed Plantation (see Stage 8).

Another period of Anglian glaciation (going back 450,000 years) eroded the land to form boulder clay

and gravel ridges (in Cromer and south of Blakeney), the mix of which, along with sand, created the Brecks. This unique gorse-covered sandy heath, covering 1015km², is traversed on parts of the early stages of the Peddars Way in north Suffolk and south Norfolk. After this glaciation and erosion a series of hot and then cold phases caused the ice sheets covering the whole of Norfolk to melt, triggering a rising sea level, which began filling what we know as The Wash. This significant coastal indentation between Skegness and Hunstanton is instantly identifiable on any map of the UK.

Today the continually changing tides still shape the land, creating a coastline that is a combination of salt-marsh, sand dunes, chalk cliffs and gravel ridges. Further geological discoveries are being made all the time, from the unearthing of sabre tooth tiger remains in the Cromer Forest Beds, to the West Runton elephant (twice the weight of an African one) found in December 1990 and thought to have lived 600,000–700,000 years ago. This landscape has a fascinating story to tell.

For more information see www.naturalengland.org.uk and click on Geology.

HISTORY OF NORFOLK

When walking some stretches of the National Trail you won't see another person for miles, yet on others – especially in summer when passing through



Cromer Pier was formerly the end of the National Trail until the forming of the England Coast Path took it almost back into Suffolk (Stage 8)



The church and war memorial at Ringstead are passed on the Peddars Way (Stage 4)

the coastal resorts – you won't believe how many people there are. But one distinctive feature of the entire route is that there are, throughout its length, parts that feel barely touched by the hand of man. So it comes as a surprise to learn that this area of Norfolk has been populated for hundreds of thousands of years.

Archaeological finds along the coast and further inland, where scores of tools, coins and the oldest example of a hand axe have been discovered, are proof of human habitation since at least the last Ice Age, around 700,000BC.

From small beginnings, when tiny communities populated its landscapes, the area that is now Norfolk became a hub for production with the arrival of the Bronze Age (around 2000BC). The coast was clearly important for work and also for spiritual practices; a wooden type of altar named Seahenge has been found at Holme next the Sea, dating from 2050BC. There are also many Bronze Age tumuli (burial mounds) on the inland section of the National Trail.

During the Iron Age (from 800BC) the population of the area increased, but its most famous residents came in 1BC with the arrival of the Iceni tribe. These people settled, and built roads – possibly including the Peddars Way in its earliest form – houses, towns and even forts. They were not strong enough, however, to keep out the Romans in AD43, who had already dominated many other native peoples.

The Romans began building their own settlements, replacing the Iceni forts – among them Branodunum in Brancaster (Stage 5) – and forcing the local people to construct new roads, including the one that would become the Peddars Way. There was a minor rebellion in AD47 so it was agreed that the now infamous Boudicca's husband could rule independently as a 'client king' in what is now Norfolk.

All was peaceful until his death in AD61. Under Iceni law Boudicca would have succeeded her husband, but under Roman law only a male heir could take charge and she was denied her right, flogged by the Romans and her two daughters raped. Understandably she went on to lead the mass uprising against the Romans which nearly toppled their British colony. Ultimately, however, she was unsuccessful, and the Romans continued to rule here until the end of the occupation in AD410.

Slowly the evidence of their domination began to disappear and the arrival of new tribes from north-west Europe marked the start of the new Anglo Saxon culture in Britain. Many remaining Roman relics were destroyed. At that point the area became part of the Kingdom of East Anglia and new towns were built.

Around AD865 the kingdom was threatened once more when the Vikings attacked, and in AD869 the king – Edmund (later martyred and commemorated in a chapel, the remains of which sit on the coast in Hunstanton – Stage 4) – was killed.

The Vikings then ruled for over 200 years until the Norman Conquest in 1066. By the 14th century farming had become the main activity in the now prospering county. Crops were grown, peat extracted and animals raised. Castles and churches were of great importance in the country at this time and Norfolk had more than its fair share, with key examples of both found in Castle Acre (Stage 2).

In the 19th century the decline in agriculture meant that many wealthy landowners were forced to sell their estates, but with the rise of the British seaside resort in Victorian times it was now holidaymakers who began to invade. During World Wars I and II the landscape of coast and country changed once again with the arrival of the military (see Stage 1, 'Military presence on the Peddars Way'). Villagers were forced to leave their homes – and in some cases never return – so that the army could train. The coast was patrolled and defences set up, some of which still remain today.

Nowadays the landscape through which the Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path pass has telltale signs of the past. Whether Bronze Age tumuli, the traces of Roman forts, military gun cupolas – or, indeed, the very track underfoot – when walking the National Trail you become just another one of the many people who have trodden the ground over the years. It is somehow comforting to know that, in years to come, many more will follow in your footsteps.

HISTORY OF THE TRAIL

Officially the Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path was opened as a National Trail in 1986 at a ceremony presided over by the Prince of Wales at Holme next the Sea. Before that both trails existed as separate entities, the Peddars Way taking in the Brecks and farmland of Norfolk, and the coast path taking walkers on a meander along the cliffs and shingle on the edge of the North Sea. Back in the 1960s the Peddars Way was considered for Long-Distance Path (now National Trail) status as one of several old trackways to be preserved. However, it was thought that its 79km (49 miles) were not sufficient and so it was eventually decided to link it with the coast path (itself a combination of existing paths and rights of way, along with newly negotiated thoroughfares) to create the 216km (133 mile) route as it stands today.

When it was formed it was just 155km (96 miles) but of late it's been continuously evolving. In December 2014, as part of the goal to create an England (and eventually all-mainland Britain) coastal path – set to open in 2020 – access rights were sought and granted to allow the trail to stick to the coastline between Sheringham and Cromer where it previously had to cut inland (on what is now marked as the Beeston Wildlife Trail). In 2015 it was officially extended continuing on from Cromer Pier to Sea Palling a further 28km (16 miles) away, and in 2016 an extra stretch was added on to Hopton.

The war memorial in Hunstanton marks the end of Stage 4



A howling good view – the wooden sculpture at St Edmund's Chapel at dusk



STAGE 1

Knettishall Heath to Little Cressingham

Start	Car park opposite Blackwater Carr, Knettishall Heath (TL 943 807)
Finish	Crossroads in Little Cressingham (TF 873 000)
Distance	23.5km (14½ miles)
Time	6½hr
Refreshments	Pubs and cafés in Thetford; Dog and Partridge PH, Stonebridge; Windmill Inn, Great Cressingham (off-route)
Toilets	At car park/rest area 6km after start
Public transport	Brecks bus from Thetford station; infrequent buses from Little Cressingham to Watton, Threxton and Attleborough, with connections to King's Lynn; bus from Stonebridge to Thetford
Parking	Knettishall Heath; limited on-street parking in Little Cressingham
Accommodation	B&Bs, hotels and hostels in Thetford; B&B in Little Cressingham and Great Cressingham (off-route)

After a fleeting foray into Suffolk on the first few steps of this National Trail you will be plunged into Norfolk's Breckland landscape with its trademark Scots pines. This forest scenery accompanies most of this stage, interspersed with the occasional glimpse of the wide-open spaces that this county is famed for. Keep a lookout for the skittish muntjac deer and the first few art installations that line the Peddars Way, and steal a look into the secretive military land that borders your journey and is closed to all but the MOD.

► The walk starts with very little fanfare: a signpost opposite the car park simply stating 'Peddars Way'. Here you're informed that approximately 46 miles separate you from Holme next the Sea where you will join the Norfolk Coast Path section of the National Trail. There are a few stages between now and then so take your first steps through the gate and for the next few minutes enjoy your brief foray in Suffolk. Trees stretch above on either

It's advisable to pick lunch up in Thetford before you start. There is nowhere guaranteed to offer food on the path, particularly out of season.

Map continues on page 34

side as you head north before following the path over a small footbridge. The water beneath is the Little Ouse River and marks your transition into Norfolk.

Here the path bears northeast before swinging north again. In winter patches of snowdrops line the track as you skirt along the trees and pass fields of pigs on your left-hand side. Keep your eyes peeled as hares often tear across the path ahead. Before reaching the A1066, in the last field on the right, look out for a metal pipe that drops into the ground for several metres. This is part of an elaborate irrigation system that keeps the typically sandy Breckland soil damp when it is too dry to produce crops.



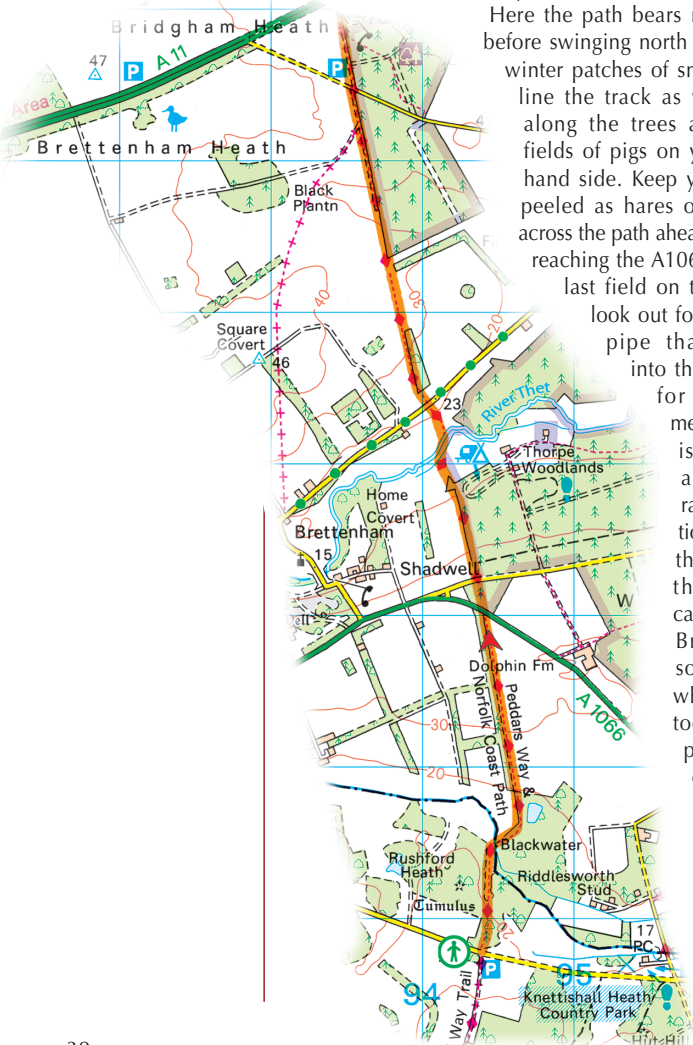
Crossing the Little Ouse River, the boundary between Suffolk and Norfolk at Knettishall Heath

A good start point for this section if you want to walk the path and camp along the way.

Continue on to cross the A1066, taking care as cars come pretty fast along here. Follow the path through more trees then cross the minor road into **Thorpe Woodlands**. From this point on it's worth keeping alert in case you spot a muntjac deer. These dog-like small mammals have a tendency to dart out from the trees before jumping back in again before you've managed to get your camera ready! Through the trees on the right – much easier to spot – are usually some tents or caravans on the Forestry Commission's campsite. ▶

Soon the path emerges from the trees onto open fields to reach a handy wooden boardwalk (watch out when wet as it gets very slippery) above the often boggy fields and on to the **River Thet**. Swans and ducks tend to congregate in these waters as you edge the banks on the wooden slats. A bridge takes you over the river. Continue ahead, now on a dirt track to cross the Brettenham road.

Meander through the trees at Broom Covert and along the edge of farmland. Continue through an area of lowland heath owned and managed by Natural England and one of the largest areas of heathland in the Brecks.





*Taking the boardwalk
alongside the
River Thet near
Thorpe Farm*

Brettenham Heath Nature Reserve is predominantly a combination of acid grassland, chalk grassland and heather heathland and features a number of Scots pine that are characteristic of this part of Norfolk. The area has an interesting archaeology: there is evidence of what is believed to be a post-medieval stock enclosure, and a Neolithic stone flake was also found here in 1985.

Several species of birds can be spotted in this habitat including curlew, redstart and buzzard. It is also said that it has the lowest rainfall of anywhere in the UK, so fingers crossed this holds true when you visit! It is worth noting that from March to October is the breeding season, so access is restricted (the Peddars Way is not affected). For more information see www.naturalengland.org.uk and click on National Nature Reserves.

Continue along the path and soon you'll start to hear the hum of the cars on the nearby A11 road. Just before reaching it there's a handy place to stop on the right. It's a

rest area for cars and usually has a coffee/snack bar year-round, as well as toilets.

After a quick break continue north, taking great care when crossing the main road. Once safely on the other side you'll get a real taste of things to come in the shape of a notice on the left – 'Military Training: Keep Out' – a prominent feature on this stage of the Peddars Way.

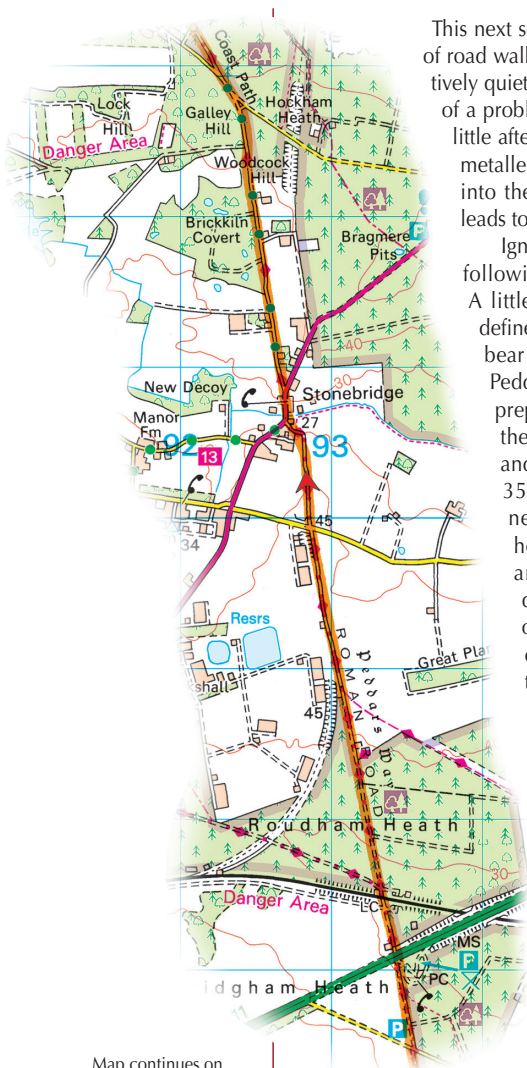
Carry on to the railway line (Ely–Norwich) and cross via a gate, making sure to listen carefully for oncoming trains before going. ▶

A few steps later another path veers off to the left. This is an old drove road that is thought to predate the Roman one you're walking on. From here this so-called Great Fen Road (the Hereward Way) stretches off into the distance, passing several meres (drinking places) on the way. As Breckland is often short of water these ancient thoroughways were plotted to take in such vital sources to refresh weary travellers.

To continue on your way ignore this path (perhaps save it for another day) and carry straight on. Pass through more woods to reach the gas pipeline pumping station, a fairly pungent-smelling place! Here the track feels like more of a minor road than the dirt tracks you've been following thus far. There are remains of an old dismantled railway to the left of the path, formerly the Thetford–Watton line. Far more visible are the horses and donkeys in the fields round about. Carry on ahead to reach the two abutments of an old railway bridge where the path continues to a road.

Cross the road in front of you and turn right and continue on through the village. There is more evidence that you are heading deeper into military country with a number of signs forbidding military vehicles from driving down the roads. Walk along the pavement, passing the Dog and Partridge pub (food served all day from 12 noon on weekends and from 4pm weekdays, accommodation available, www.dog-and-partridge.org.uk), following the well-marked signs north. At the junction of the main Thetford road and a minor road, bear left on the latter.

For a safer, alternative route turn right just before the line; after a few metres find the entrance to a tunnel on your left and pass under the railway.



This next section involves a fair amount of road walking, though luckily it is relatively quiet so shouldn't prove too much of a problem. Pass some houses and a little after **Woodcock Hill** you'll see a metalled road on the left veering off into the trees. This is the road that leads to the military base.

Ignore this turn-off and carry on following the National Trail signs. A little after **Galley Hill** the more defined road swings left while you bear right following signs for the Peddars Way. From this point on prepare yourself. All the land to the left is owned by the MOD and is used for military training 350 days of the year. For the next few kilometres you will hear gunfire and explosions, and may see tanks and soldiers appearing on either side of the track. It's certainly an odd backdrop in an otherwise tranquil area.

Still it does add interest to the walk as you catch glimpses of a world that will, for now, remain a mystery to us civilians. Note that **Watering Farm** is marked on the OS map approximately 1.5km north from the fork at Galley Hill. The place holds little significance other than it means a number of trucks use this section of the track to access it, so care is needed. Apart from

Map continues on page 38

MILITARY PRESENCE ON THE PEDDARS WAY

Behind the secretive fences and gates and their 'No Entry' signs to the west of the Peddars Way sits a deserted village called Tottington. Taken over (along with the villages of Buckenham Tofts, Langford, Stanford, Sturston and West Tofts) by the Army during World War II it was incorporated into the Stanford Battle Area (established 1942) and used as part of a 30,000-acre training ground to prepare forces for the Battle of Normandy in 1944. Understandably not all the residents were happy to leave – to hear a perspective from one such villager it is worth checking out *Farming, on a Battle Ground* by A Norfolk Woman (aka Lucille Reeve).



Warning signs line the first stage of the path from the A11 to Home Farm near Merton – do not cross!

Despite the end of the war in

1945 no one was ever allowed to go back to the village again. The government took over the land under threat of a compulsory purchase order – going back on a promise they had made – leaving many villagers with no farms and no homes. Although they fought to return, events surrounding the Cold War meant there was no hope of them going back. The village became a dedicated training ground owned by the Ministry of Defence.

Access is strictly out of bounds and walking on this section of the National Trail you will often hear the explosions and shots carried on the wind from inside the boundaries. But it is said that in what was Tottington the church is still standing. You may have seen glimpses of it – other than while walking this section of path – on the TV series *Dad's Army* since it was used as a location for scenes when the Home Guard went on exercises.

being aware of approaching vehicles, it is worth noting that the tyre tracks can create large grooves which are very muddy or waterlogged particularly after a spell of bad weather. Once you've passed the turn-off to the farm



Expect to see and hear evidence of military activity while on this woodland track shortly after leaving Stonebridge

you can relax as the path is blocked to vehicular access by concrete boulders.

This is another spot where it's worth keeping the camera ready in case you spot a deer. Bizarrely they seem at home with gunfire, though are still very jumpy around walkers! Continuing along the path you'll notice the first of one of five of the Norfolk Songlines stones that line the trail sporadically from here until the sea is reached (see 'Arts' in the Introduction). This one bears the inscription 'The footprint of our ancestors/Familiar as our own



The first of five Norfolk Songlines sculptures by Tom Perkins that dot the Peddars Way



faces/Remote as fossils/Written on clay/And washed away/Over and over/Over and over'.

Not long after soaking up these poetic words the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's **Thompson Water** is passed on your right. You may spy parts of it over a small fence through the trees – especially in winter when most of the foliage is gone. This lake was created in 1845 by damming a tributary of the River Wissey to create a key watering hole for drovers. It's now surrounded by a nature reserve called Thompson Common. Don't try to sneak over the fence to get access (you'll notice others have done so) because a few steps later will see you reach its entrance proper. This is a good spot for a break. Worth a detour is Willie's Clump, near the lakeside path, named after the late J F Willie Wilson who was one of the key people who helped establish this National Trail.

Managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, **Thompson Common** is a mix of wetland, woodland and grassland and is teeming with rare plants and insects. It is perhaps most famous for its pingos, small pools formed by pockets of ground ice around 9000 years ago in the last Ice Age. For a closer look a 12.75km (8-mile) circular walking

Map continues on page 40

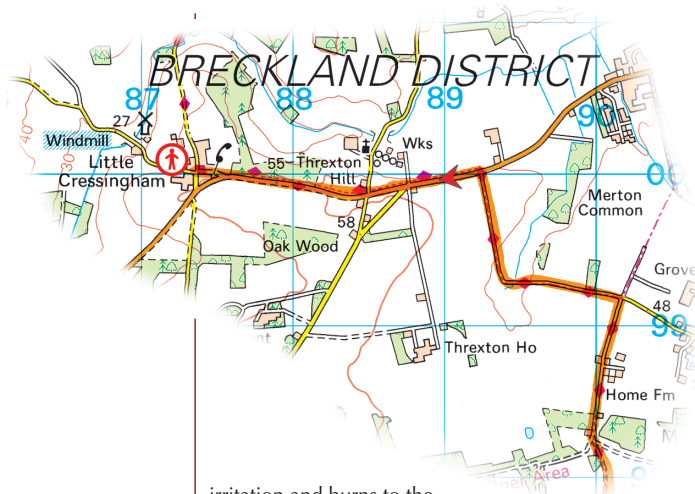


route, the Great Eastern Pingo Trail, tours these geological phenomena. This is worth checking out if you are staying a little longer in the area or are feeling especially energetic and fancy adding it onto your route. For more information visit www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk and click on Nature Reserves.

The second of the five Norfolk Songlines sculptures appears just before Merton Park

Continue on the path as the trees begin to thin and soon, near the Cherryrow Plantation, you'll see a minor road on the right that leads to Pockthorpe. Here is another handy place to stop for a snack as several more concrete boulders block the track to traffic and provide ample benches for a weary walker. Otherwise cross this minor road and continue on, with fewer trees now lining the path. When you head back into the woods again you'll pass behind the Merton estate owned by Lord Walsingham who helped open up this particular stretch of the long-distance route.

Just after passing the second Norfolk Songlines sculpture – bearing the quote 'Surveyors have made their lines on the land/Trapping Albion in a net of roads/A taut web on the edge of empire' – look out for warning signs about the giant hogweed rising above the path. The sap causes



irritation and burns to the skin that can last for several days and can even result in blindness if contact is made with the eyes. In winter it's not so much of an issue, but in summer care is definitely needed – especially if bringing children with you.

Passing the sculpture marks the end of the neighbouring military presence; the MOD land branches off to the left at Blackbreck Covert to the east while your path heads north, passing **Home Farm**, the first proper residence seen in a while. Stick to the path, which is now more of a dirt and gravel road, passing between farm buildings to reach a crossroads.

Here a sign will advise of the distance to establishments in the nearby village of **Merton**. It's certainly an option for accommodation (currently there is one B&B) – especially when other places are full in high season – but bear in mind a return journey will add 1km to your route. If you're not planning this detour take the signposted left turn onto a grassy track. Follow this along the edges of fields, lined with arching trees, then turn right to follow the path up and along to the Brandon road (B1108).

Cross this. It's not immediately obvious from the signage whether the path goes along the fast-moving road on the steep embankment or in the field behind it, but it is, thankfully, in the field. So turn left, keeping to the track on the edge of farmland with the hedge to the left. It stays behind this for most of the way now, occasionally signposted to move onto the road side of the hedge, though luckily on a wide grassy verge.

Finally the welcome sight of the village sign for **Little Cressingham** comes into view ahead. Make sure you stick to the right-hand road at the fork and walk down carefully into the village. At the crossroads turn right to reach its very quiet centre.

LITTLE CRESSINGHAM

Little Cressingham is a small but pleasant village. It may, as its moniker suggests, be lacking in size but it is a settlement that is scattered across the surrounding countryside. Points of interest include the Grade I-listed church of St Andrew and the disused Grade II-listed water and windmill. Sadly the village pub – The White Horse – closed in 2004.

It is worth noting that there is a bus stop in Little Cressingham with a very infrequent service to Watton, Threxton or Attleborough, from where onward links go to a number of towns including King's Lynn (see Appendix B). There is some (admittedly limited) potential to break your journey here if you want to do Stage 1 as a single day. However, waiting until the end of Stage 2 is a better option.

Accommodation options are a little limited. The only one directly en route is at the crossroads: the friendly Sycamore House B&B, used to attending to tired trail walkers. They offer a number of rooms, with private or shared facilities, and a fabulous hearty cooked breakfast to fuel you up for the next day's walk. Included in the stay is a lift to and from the Olde Windmill Inn in Great Cressingham where you can grab your evening meal! For more information about the village check out www.ltcressinghamandthrexton.org.uk.

There are other overnight options in Great Cressingham but they are some distance off the path and, by this time, the thought of any extra kilometres – even just a couple – can be really off-putting! More information about other options is available from the National Trail office and free from the website at www.nationaltrail.co.uk.