



CROMER

PEOPLE AND PLACE



*Oh I do love to be beside the seaside,
I do love to be beside the sea
I do love to walk along the prom-
prom-prom ...*

John A Glover-Kind

*I'm the on'y one on Cromer pier this
February day, An what they call a lazy
wind is whippin' up the spray. That lazy
wind, that crazy wind, from icy seas
come tew yer. Tha's jus' tew lazy to go
round, an' so that go clean trew yer!
Lazy wind by John Kett*

Cromer is best known for its crabs and its pier. These reflect the two major influences on its development: fishing and tourism. At heart it remains a traditional English seaside resort, one of the few still retaining an end-of-pier 'Seaside Special' summer show. This traditional variety show with its blend of comedy, singing and dancing attracts more than 40,000 visitors to the pier's Pavillion Theatre each summer season, though it's reputed that overall the pier has never made a penny profit since it was first built over 100 years ago. Cromer's pier is the genuine article, a pukka pier complete with Lifeboat Station at its seaward end. Since it opened in 1900 it's been a place to promenade and what better place even today to watch the waves roll by, peer in the buckets of children crabbing with baited lines, or simply sit in the shelter of its pavilioned seats and enjoy the sunset?

The pier isn't the only attraction. Visitors to Cromer can enjoy exploring the old centre of town – a maze of narrow streets around its parish church, St. Peter and Paul's. You certainly can't miss the church. Its 160 ft tower is visible from almost everywhere in Cromer and is the highest in Norfolk.

On fine summer days Cromer's safe sandy beaches are busy with

families with young children and if the weather is bad there is always the cinema. Cromer is the only North Norfolk coastal town still retaining a cinema. Other attractions include two museums and the cliff top golf course. Not far away is Felbrigg Hall, owned by the National Trust, with magnificent parkland walks and ancient woodlands.

For the best view of Cromer climb the church tower, a slightly dizzying experience, or walk along the eastern cliffs to the lighthouse which stands on a vantage point with superb views both over the town and out to sea. Cromer is much more than just a summer holiday resort. It has grown over the last 100 years into the largest town on the North Norfolk coast. Its population of over 8000 exceeds that of Sheringham, Wells or Hunstanton and it is the administrative headquarters for North Norfolk with the District Council offices located here.

Opposite: View looking west over Cromer towards East Runton.

Above: Crab boat running the waves at Cromer beach.

Below: In recent years both Cromer and East Runton have become popular with surfers.



TIME AND TIDE

Cromer has a long history as a small fishing settlement and a much shorter one as a fashionable resort town. Its story begins with that of another town, Shipden. You won't find Shipden on any modern map as this fishing and trading settlement, situated seaward of Cromer, disappeared under the waves by the late fourteenth century. It is said that until the nineteenth century, on very low tides, the remains of the church of St Peter, Shipden could still be seen. Then in 1888, the paddle steamer *Victoria*, on its way out of Cromer, foundered on Church rock as the remains of the church had become known. No lives were lost but the *Victoria* was wrecked (not too many ships can have sunk after hitting a church!) and attempts were made to destroy the 'rock' with explosives.

Shipden was lost to cliff erosion, with its church succumbing around 1390. Its residents were granted land in an area known at the time as Crowsmere. The name stuck and modern Cromer takes its name from this.

The problem for Cromer, as for Shipden before it, is the lack of any natural harbour for its fishing boats. Boats had to be pulled up onto the beach to unload and for safekeeping. To protect the cliffs from erosion and to provide a safe place to unload catches the residents of Cromer have a long history of building piers and jetties. These have been built and rebuilt at Cromer since 1391 with almost countless instances of their destruction by storms, and an ongoing need to levy dues and taxes to pay for their rebuilding.

As well as the threat from the seas, Cromer fishermen in medieval days were in considerable danger from pirates. In 1404 fishermen from Cley and Cromer were granted the right to go to sea in convoy 'with forcible men, artillers and victuals to resist the King's enemies for the safety of the coasts and ports there'.

By the fifteenth century Cromer was a prosperous trading centre, its fishermen working waters off Norway, Denmark and Iceland for cod, herring, ling and orgeys. Cromer was also becoming well known for its crabs and lobsters. Daniel Defoe, in the eighteenth century, mentions both Cromer's fame for lobsters and its reputation as a dangerous coast for ships. This area of the Norfolk coastline became known as the

'Devil's Throat' because of the number of ship wrecks and lack of any safe harbour between here and Yarmouth.

Cromer has been a holiday resort since the late 1700s. Jane Austin in her novel *Emma* written in 1816 declares, 'Percy was a week at Cromer once, and he holds it to be the best of all the sea-bathing places.' There were two key factors in the development of Cromer from a rather exclusive and fashionable place for shooting, horse riding on the beach and sea-bathing by families of London gentry to the popular seaside resort of late Victorian days. The first was the coming of the railways in 1877. The second was the writing of Clement Scott, a journalist with the *Telegraph* and author, who popularised the Cromer coast as 'Poppyland' during the 1880s.

By 1900, with its new pier, promenade and many large hotels, the Hotel de Paris being one of the few which remains, it had all the trimmings of a holiday resort for the masses. The coming of the railway marked the end of an era. No longer did the two-masted sailing ships land their cargoes of Sunderland coal on the beach with the bustle of horse and donkey carts taking away the coal. Cromer was becoming a progressive new resort and one of the first in England to allow mixed bathing rather than the strict segregation of the sexes typical of the time. Modern Cromer, the holiday resort, had been born.



Opposite left: Crab pots – Cromer has a long history of crab fishing.

Opposite right: Cromer crabs.

Opposite below: Cromer beach – a tractor reverses pushing a crab boat towards the water.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

- ~ What's in a name? Cromer was once known as Crowsmere literally meaning the pond of Crows. Cromer is not mentioned in the Domesday book as at this time, in the eleventh century, a settlement existed north of the site of modern Cromer. This was the town of Shipden, lost to the sea through cliff erosion by the end of the fourteenth century.
- ~ The bells, the bells. Legend has it that the Church bells of the lost town of Shipden can still be heard in stormy weather from Cromer's seafront and herald disasters at sea.
- ~ A pier of two halves. In November 1993 the runaway rig, *Tayjack*, broke lose from its moorings off East Runton and was swept by a north-westerly gale into Cromer pier cutting a 30-metre hole through the pier at its landward end. The pier was repaired within a few months but the legal action to sort out who should pay took longer – six years!
- ~ The ghosts of Cromer Pier. Every theatre has its ghosts but the Pavilion Theatre on Cromer Pier has more than most. So many strange reports, from sightings of medieval men in rags to ghostly lifeboat men have been made that paranormal investigators have researched the pier. Whatever your beliefs it's certainly a place with strong atmospheres and a remarkable history.
- ~ The case of Black Shuck and Sherlock Holmes. North Norfolk's most terrifying spook haunts the cliffs between Sheringham, Cromer and Overstrand. Black Shuck is a huge, black hound with terrible blazing eyes who prowls the coastline at night. As the old Norfolk saying reports, 'And a dreadful thing from the cliff did spring, and its wild bark thrilled around. His eyes had the glow of fires below, 'twas the form of the Spectre Hound.' It's certainly not good news to meet Black Shuck as it's said that anyone who does will die within the

- year. Some say the myth goes back to Viking times and he is the embodiment of Shukr, the dog companion of the god Thor. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle visited Cromer in 1901 staying at Cromer Hall. He would undoubtedly have heard the local tales of Black Shuck and his 1902 best-seller, *Hound of the Baskervilles*, is clearly based on the story. Even Baskerville Hall in the book, while set on Dartmoor, bears a striking resemblance to Cromer Hall.
- ~ Cromer crabs. Cromer crabs have been famed for centuries as the best in Britain. Since medieval times they were traded from Cromer to the London markets. Today the crab boats still work from Cromer beach. The crabbing season is from April to September and each boat manages up to 200 pots with a two-man crew. The present Cromer Crab Company employs more than 150 people and supplies Cromer crabs across Europe. This company together with Norfolk Shellfish based in Sheringham handles over three million crabs a year!
- ~ Cromer beds. Cromer has given its name to the Cromer Forest Bed – an Ice Age deposit rich in fossils which outcrops in the cliffs – and to a period in Ice Age history, the Cromerian, for which Cromer's glacial cliff deposits are the best example.
- ~ The first Lifeboat station in Norfolk. Cromer has a long and proud history of lifeboats and lifeboatmen. Norfolk's very first lifeboat station was established here by public subscription in 1805. The most famous Cromer lifeboatman was Henry Blogg. He joined the lifeboat service in 1894 aged 18 only retiring 54 years later. He was coxswain through two world wars and won the RNLI's gold medal three times and silver medal four times, a unique achievement. Many sailors owe their lives to him and his crews and the daring rescues he led are legendary.

Opposite: Sunset at Cromer pier.





WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE

*Cliff slopes engraved in golden gorse
Above a beach etched white with breaking waves*

Walk along Cromer pier and you walk above the least known wilderness of the North Norfolk coast. The seabed, below low water, is as rich and varied a habitat as any on dry land. More than 100 species of fish and marine invertebrates depend on these shallow inshore waters. Cromer is famous for its crabs for good reason: the seabed here, for several kilometres offshore, is littered with large flints. Crevices, nooks and crannies in this rocky underwater world make ideal homes for crabs and lobsters and support a tremendous diversity of other marine life.

These shallow waters are a highly threatened wilderness. The coastal waters of the North Sea remain productive but over-fishing has seen populations, first of herring, then of cod and mackerel, decimated. Other threats to wildlife include pollution and offshore sand and gravel extraction but most of all our marine wildlife suffers from our ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude. Although these marine creatures are as beautiful and fascinating as any, conservation organisations in general have been slow to take action to safeguard them.

Back on dry land Cromer has one of the most attractive cliff top walks of any in North Norfolk. Head east towards the lighthouse and within a few minutes walk there are cliff top woodlands and hidden, bracken covered valleys. In spring both the valley and the woods below the lighthouse are washed purple-mauve with carpets of bluebells. The cliffs east of Cromer have a completely different character from those between Weybourne and Sheringham. They are higher, reaching over 200 ft (70 metres), are generally less steep and almost entirely clothed in vegetation. There are acres of vivid yellow gorse which on sunny days scent the air with a heady coconut aroma. Kestrels and sparrowhawks regularly hunt along the cliffs here. Sand martins, swallows and swifts perform aerobatics sometimes flashing past just feet from cliff top walkers.

In Cromer take special note of the collared doves which are common in most large gardens here. In 1955 the pair which nested near Cromer was the first ever to breed in Britain. A Cromer wildlife success story! These pioneer birds were the forefront of an invasion which has made the collared dove a common bird through the whole country today.



Opposite: Poppyland – the vibrant red of poppies brightens a field inland of Cromer. Above: A waxwing in a Cromer garden – in some winters these birds arrive in numbers along the North Norfolk coast and are attracted to sites, including town gardens, that offer a plentiful supply of berries.