



HOLKHAM

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Holkham, a tiny village and a huge estate, lies at the heart of the North Norfolk coast roughly midway between Hunstanton and Cromer. The village is a cluster of well-kept, pretty Victorian cottages at the northern entrance to Holkham estate. It has fewer than 200 inhabitants and is really part of the estate with most of the people living here employed at Holkham and many families having lived here for several generations. The estate is vast, over 3000 acres, and surrounded by a brick wall nearly nine miles in length. The park which has an attractive lake, some wonderful trees and a large herd of fallow deer is open to the public, as is the impressive though austere-looking Holkham Hall. The Hall is the best example of Palladian architecture in Britain and has a sumptuous collection of rare paintings, sculptures and fine art. Attractions for visitors include the Holkham Pottery, Bygones Collection and the walled garden centre. Adjacent to the coast road is the Victoria Hotel which provides good food, a warm welcome and a much-appreciated haven especially after an icy winter's walk in the park or along the shore.

There is something magical about the coast at Holkham. Despite its popularity with visitors it still retains a quality of timelessness and tranquillity. Even on summer weekends, when Lady Ann's Drive, the access point to the beach, is crowded with cars and thronged with holidaymakers this remains true. People come to Holkham to walk their dogs, to fly kites on the beach, sunbathe in the dunes, walk through the pines, to birdwatch or to visit Holkham Hall and its many attractions. This is a place of recreation in the true sense of the word. A place to breathe deep, slow down and allow the Holkham atmosphere to 're-create' you, at least sufficiently to return to the busy madness of the twenty-first century refreshed and renewed. What is it that gives Holkham this special quality? Perhaps it's the sheer sense of space and freedom. At low tide the sea seems to retreat to the horizon though its presence is still there in the low murmur of distant waves. The huge, sweeping expanse of beach at Holkham Bay runs for miles and, backed with fragrant pines, on a warm summer's day has an almost Mediterranean feel. It's a place to wander barefoot, to pick up shells or

marvel at the haze of sea lavender that colours the marshes purple in late summer. In winter racehorses from Newmarket are brought here to exercise when the Newmarket gallops are frozen hard. Mounted soldiers from the Household Cavalry also come each summer and gallop their horses through the surf. There is a biannual Holkham Fair which attracts thousands to Holkham Park for the displays of countryside crafts and produce. Whatever the season, Holkham is one of the best places to discover the special nature of the North Norfolk coast and be captivated by its magic.



Opposite: The wild beauty of Holkham Bay.

Above: The Household Cavalry exercise their horses on Holkham Bay.

Overleaf left: Holkham Bay framed by dark pines.

Overleaf right: Holkham Hall and Park busy at the biannual Holkham Fair.





TIME AND TIDE

There was a settlement at Holkham more than 1000 years before the Earls of Leicester created the Holkham Estate. The earthworks of an Iron Age fort are still visible on the marshes at Holkham and date from around AD47. This was an Iceni settlement, the tribe famed for fighting the Romans under their Queen Boudica. Is it romantic to think that Boudica herself or her daughter may have come here?

In Roman times foot soldiers would have tramped the route that now forms the western boundary of Holkham Estate, perhaps travelling to or from the shore fort at Brancaster. On the OS map the route of this Roman road, running south from Holkham to Toftrees, is easy to follow.

Holkham also has associations with Anna, King of the Angles in the seventh century AD. Anna may have lived here for a period and the Church of St Withburga, which stands on a Saxon mound within the Holkham estate, is named after one of his four daughters who died in AD 743 and was revered as a saint.

The Vikings are thought to have sailed their longboats up tidal creeks at Holkham and to have established a fort on the marshes here in the ninth or tenth century AD.

The view in medieval times would have been quite different from the present one. The high tide line would have been roughly where the main coast road is today and Holkham Staithe was a small but busy harbour capable of holding fishing boats and trading ships of some size. There were no pines on the sand-dunes then and where there are grazing marshes today lay tidal creeks and saltmarsh. By the 1500's the channels had silted considerably but smaller fishing vessels still used the Staithe and the site of the present-day Holkham lake was still linked to the sea as a tidal creek.

The more recent history of Holkham is inseparable from the story of the Coke family. Present day Holkham Hall was the vision of Thomas Coke, who began building in 1734. He inherited the Holkham Estate lands in 1707 when he was only ten and at the age of 15 embarked on his six-year Grand Tour of Europe which so influenced his later vision for Holkham. During his time in Italy he developed a passion for the classical style of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. By the time he

returned to England he needed a large house to display the amazing collection of classical treasures he had amassed. The creation of Holkham Hall and its landscaped grounds involved the wholesale removal of at least one village, explaining the now isolated church within the park.

Thomas died before his vision for the Hall was complete but the work continued under his nephew Thomas William Roberts who inherited the estate in 1776 and took the family name. It was this Thomas that became known as Coke of Norfolk and pioneered new agricultural systems at Holkham which influenced farming across England. Coke's 'Norfolk four course' replaced the previous system of leaving fields fallow every third year and he introduced a Dutch system of planting wheat, barley and turnips in succession, using a crop of clover to replace nitrogen in the soil and provide winter grazing for cattle.

Coke of Norfolk became the first Earl of Leicester and was also created a peer by Queen Victoria in recognition of his contribution to agriculture. It is said that when he inherited Holkham in 1776 the estate was 'a barren sandy heath of windy slopes where rabbits fought for grass' and by the time he died in 1842 the estate was one of the most efficient and productive in England. His annual sheep shearings, held in the Great Barn, were visited by thousands.

His son, yet another Thomas, was also a pioneer and his planting of the pines on the dunes at Holkham between 1853 and 1891 is said to be the first large scale attempt to stabilise sand dunes in Britain.

Today the estate is still owned by the Coke family. Their landholdings extend far beyond the confines of the original Holkham Estate wall, with much of the coast between Burnham Overy Staithe and Stiffkey included. Most of this coastal area is now managed for wildlife conservation.

Opposite: Holkham Park – a seated bronze statue of Thomas Coke, Earl of Leicester, surveys the deer park and Hall.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

- ~ What's in a name? The name Holkham may have Viking origins and is said to be derived from the Danish for 'ship town'. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book as Holcham. Another possibility is that it means a settlement in a hollow, from the Old English holc (hollow) and ham (a homestead).
- ~ Garden make-over. The gardens at Holkham Hall were designed by Britain's most famous landscape architect, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown.
- ~ Lost commons and displaced villages. Estates such as Holkham grew at least in part at the expense of 'commoners'. In 1794 Norfolk had 143,000 acres of common land and by 1844 only 27,000 remained. The development of Holkham Hall and Park displaced an entire village.
- ~ Can't see the trees for the wood. The planting of a continuous belt of woodland around Holkham Park was begun in 1780. Over the next ten years it is estimated that 1,057,940 trees were planted.
- ~ Royalty at Holkham. For many years the Royal family have owned a wooden beach hut or chalet secluded in the pines of Holkham Meals. It was used by the Queen Mother and other members of the Royal family as a base for leisurely afternoon picnics and walks along the beach. Sadly it was burnt down by vandals in 2003.
- ~ Birthday suits instead of bathing suits. There are eleven officially designated naturist beaches around the British coastline, and the western end of Holkham beach is the only place in Norfolk where it's legal to walk 'sky clad' through the waves. On hot summer weekends hundreds of people travel to Holkham to enjoy an all-over tan and the open beach is dotted with colourful wind breaks where families enjoy this freedom.
- ~ Filmset Holkham. The wild setting of Holkham beach has proved attractive to film makers over many years. Perhaps the best known film clip featuring Holkham is the closing scene of *Shakespeare in Love* when Gwyneth Paltrow walks across Holkham's sands. Scenes from *The Eagle has Landed* were also filmed here.
- ~ Ten million bricks. The brick wall surrounding Holkham deer park and Estate runs continuously for about nine miles. It is estimated that more than ten million bricks were used to build it, a task which began in 1833 and took six years to complete.
- ~ From Italian acorns. The evergreen holm oaks common at Holkham are thought to originate from Italy. It is said that the acorns from which the trees descend arrived mixed in with holm oak leaves used as packing for the valuables that Thomas Coke brought back from his Grand Tour between 1712 and 1718.
- ~ Taxidermy and twitchers. Long before the advent of modern field guides and optics, the Victorian naturalist was more likely to have carried a gun than a telescope. Holkham Hall holds an amazing collection of stuffed birds: more than 200 species, most of which were obtained locally, are on display at Holkham Hall.

Opposite: A fox crossing the dunes at Holkham.





Above left: Large numbers of wigeon winter at Holkham.

Below left: White-fronted geese in the fields next to Lady Ann's Drive.

Right: Snow buntings on the foreshore at Holkham Bay.

Opposite: Pink-footed geese in early morning mist – fields inland of Holkham.