



## WELLS-NEXT-THE-SEA

PEOPLE AND PLACE

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Opposite: Wells-next-the Sea – the town, harbour channel and saltmarsh backed by farmland.

Left: Wells – pinewoods, beach huts and its long sandy beach curving into Holkham Bay.

From Wells quay a wonderful panorama spreads out before you. This is the North Norfolk marshland coast at its best; better than any painting, this living view changes constantly with the tides, the play of light and the seasons. The main harbour channel, a wide stretch of water at high tide, becomes a narrow, meandering, shallow creek at low water.

Commercial trade through the port of Wells is a thing of the past. Most of the small boats, bobbing at their moorings at high water or leaning at crazy angles perched on the sands at low tide, are pleasure boats. The fishing fleet is now reduced to 14 boats which work the waters up to 35 miles out from Wells. The profits today are mainly in crab and lobster, though depending on the season, whelks, shrimps and skate are also taken. Even though tourism has supplanted trade and fishing as Wells' main industry, its commercial history is writ large in its legacy of buildings. Favor Parker's granary (now flats) which closed in 1990 dominates the harbour front and there are many old maltings, now converted to other uses, in the town.

Throughout the summer season Wells is a bustling seaside resort. The narrow main street, Staithe Street, runs up from the quay and is lined with shops and several cafes. Not far from the top of Staithe Street and close to the parish church of St Nicholas, is a spacious green known as the Buttlands. This was once the centre of Wells and its open space provides a site for carnivals and fetes and is fringed by attractive Georgian houses.

Wells is 'next-the-sea' but it's quite a distance to the beach. You can travel the mile to the pine woods, sandy beach and boating lake by road or by narrow gauge train, though by far the best way is to enjoy the walk along the sea wall embankment which leads from the quay to the lifeboat station.

Wells is famous for its whelks and if you explore the eastern end of the harbour you will find the whelk sheds. There were more whelks landed at Wells than any other UK port up to the mid 1990s but, perhaps because of over-fishing, the industry has declined.



TIME AND TIDE

Wells has been a market town and fishing port since at least the thirteenth century. Its market charter dates from 1202. The original centre of Wells would have been near the parish church, appropriately named St Nicholas, after the patron saint of fishermen. Originally there was a tidal channel near the church providing good shelter for small boats, but this was cut off by an embankment built in 1719.

Wells is the closest port to Walsingham, which became a nationally important pilgrimage centre in medieval times. Its attractions included three curative wells, milk of the Virgin Mary, a finger-joint of St Peter and the famed 'Holy House'. The latter was built in the late eleventh century, inspired by a vision of the Virgin Mary and designed as a replica of the house in which Jesus spent his childhood at Nazareth. The popularity of pilgrimages may in part be explained by the medieval belief that going on pilgrimage lessened time spent in purgatory! The Shrine of the Virgin Mary at Walsingham was visited by many of the rich and famous including the scholar Erasmus, Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII. Did any of these notables arrive by sea at Wells?

The port was busy from medieval times up to the 1800s exporting grain (especially barley), salt fish and malt and importing coal, salt and domestic goods. Wells' fishing boats worked the waters off Scotland, Norway and Iceland and on these long voyages fish such as cod were salted at sea. Apart from fishing the other major industry in Wells was malt production. This reached a peak in the mid 1700s with Wells the second largest producer in the country, with many large maltings at work in the town. To give some idea of the scale of trade, in the mid 1700s grain exports averaged 10,000 tonnes a year and between 1819 and 1822, 11,800 tonnes were exported annually. The importing of coal stopped abruptly with the arrival of the railway from Fakenham in 1852 as it was cheaper to move coal by train.

The port had mixed fortunes in the twentieth century. There were a few good years in the 1930s exporting sugar beet for the Yorkshire Sugar Company, and then an astonishing upturn between 1970 and 1988 when up to 250 small diesel coasters brought in animal feeds, soya

beans, and fertilizer totalling up to 100,000 tonnes a year. This trade finally died because newer, larger vessels operating with the same sized crews were far more economic using the larger King's Lynn and Yarmouth ports.

Today Wells can still boast the only safe harbour for large ships on the North Norfolk coast but its visitors today are more likely to be pleasure boats than trading vessels.



Opposite: *The Albatros* at anchor in Wells channel.

Above: Wells town sign shows a fishing boat, the beach and pines.

## FLOTSAM AND JETSAM

- ~ What's in a name? Wells of course is named from its wells. The town is built above layers of chalk and many houses had wells sunk to good freshwater aquifers within the chalk.
- ~ Bite fingers and wreckers. In early medieval times the men of Wells had a reputation for plundering shipwrecks. They earned the nickname 'bite fingers' from their alleged method of removing rings from dead mariners on the wrecks.
- ~ The Golden Fleece. Between 1850 and 1880 Wells is reputed to have had 40 public houses. There are not so many today but one of the most historic pubs is the Golden Fleece, on the quayside. Its name is a reminder of the days when the wool trade was a source of wealth for Wells.
- ~ A horse-drawn lifeboat. The first lifeboat station in Wells was established on the quay in 1868. At low tide the boat had to be pulled by horses down the mile long harbour channel before it reached the sea! The shallow waters had other perils and in October 1880 the lifeboat *Eliza Adams* overturned. Her mast stuck in the sands holding the boat upside down and eleven crew members were drowned.
- ~ Stranded ships. In the floods of January 1953 the motor torpedo boat *Terra Nova* was lifted onto the quay and left high and dry when the tide receded. More recently, in 1978, a 500-ton coaster was stranded on the quay during storm conditions. The heights of these exceptional storm tides are marked on buildings opposite the quayside.
- ~ Mutiny on the *Bounty*. John Fryer who was master of *HMS Bounty*, of mutiny fame, was born in Wells in 1754. He is buried in Wells churchyard and his gravestone can be seen in the church porch.
- ~ Narrow gauge Wells. Wells is unique in having two narrow gauge railways. The first is the harbour railway built in 1858 and the second, the Wells and Walsingham Light Railway, only opened in 1982. With a track 10.25 inches wide it is said to be the narrowest railway in the world operating a public service. The four-mile track is also the longest 10.25-inch-gauge railway in the world.
- ~ *The Albatros* at Wells. This elegant sailing vessel, a familiar sight in Wells harbour, was built in Rotterdam in 1899. During the Second World War she helped Jewish refugees escape from Germany and shipped arms to the Danish resistance. In the 1990s she worked as a commercial vessel carrying soya beans from Belgium to Wells. More recently she was chartered by Greenpeace to be used in their education work and today she is used as a sail training boat.
- ~ Early morning archery. The origins of the open space in Wells known as the Buttlands goes back to the time of Henry VIII when this was the site of the town's butts – a space where every able-bodied man was required to practice with the longbow. As Henry's edict has never been repealed, the men of Wells should still assemble on the Buttlands for archery practice each morning in case they are called upon to defend the realm.

Opposite: Little Walsingham looking north to the sea. From medieval times Walsingham has been an important pilgrimage site.



WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE

*Sand and sky, wave and cloud  
Patterns of movement and stillness*

The view from Wells' quay is of a vast, flat expanse of saltmarsh extending like a patterned carpet to the horizon. These marshes stretch north from Wells for more than two kilometres – the widest extent of saltmarshes on the North Norfolk coast. The only landmarks to break their table-top flatness are the two groups of pines on the remote East Hills which somehow only seem to emphasise the sheer scale of this marshland world. This beautiful but treacherous tidal maze is best viewed from a distance as incoming tides and mud like glue make this a dangerous area to explore on foot. The wildlife here can be viewed in safety from the coast path skirting the upper edge of the marshes. This runs east from Wells to Warham Greens and beyond. Skylarks, redshanks and shelducks are noticeable at all seasons and in winter brent geese add their calls to those of waders on the marshes.

At Wells it's not really even necessary to leave the town to enjoy a wildlife spectacle. The quayside provides an excellent observation point in all seasons. In spring and summer black-headed gulls noisily patrol the harbour on the lookout for scraps. Their breeding colony, home to several thousand pairs, can be seen on the marshes in the middle distance. Records suggest a colony has been here for over 100 years. In winter, groups of brent geese come to the harbour channel to bathe, and often graze the nearby football ground and pitch and putt course in dense, dark flocks. Little grebes and cormorants are also regulars in the harbour channel and sometimes, especially in winter, kingfishers use a handy mooring rope as a convenient look-out point.

The mile-long walk along the raised sea bank to the brightly painted lifeboat station, provides opportunities to look for redshanks, turnstones, godwits, dunlins, oystercatchers and ringed plovers which regularly feed along the edge of the channel here. Colourful shelducks dabble in the mud at low tide while curlews call noisily overhead.

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Far Left: Pyramidal orchid flowering in June – sand dunes at Wells.  
Middle: Marsh fritillary orchid at Wells Dell – June.  
Left: Marsh orchid at Wells Dell – June.  
Opposite: Black-headed gulls over Wells harbour.





WILDERNESS AND WILDLIFE

Beyond the lifeboat station lie Wells woods. The pine trees here extend along the dune ridge to Holkham. On the landward side of the pines is one of the most famous birdwatching spots in England. Wells Dell is an area of birch, oak and willow scrub which has established itself in the shelter of the pines. Many rare birds have been recorded here. In autumn, fine weather over Scandinavia encourages birds to depart south on migratory flights, but if these birds meet fog and drizzle over the North Sea they will drift on easterly winds to the nearest landfall offering cover and shelter. When these ‘fall’ conditions occur then every bush in Wells Dell will be alive with warblers, robins, blackbirds, redstarts and flycatchers. Sometimes among these will be rarities such as bluethroats, arctic warblers, red-breasted flycatchers or barred warblers to the delight of the birdwatchers who gather here.

This area inland of the pines is interesting at all times of year. In spring there are wonderful displays of orchids near the boating lake. The tangled scrub of privet, rose-briar, bramble and young trees is good for warblers. Lesser-whitethroats, willow warblers, sedge warblers and garden warblers nest here. In summer and autumn this sheltered area is excellent for butterflies and dragonflies. Commas, red admirals, painted ladies and peacock butterflies find both bramble flowers and later the ripe fruits of blackberries irresistible.

*The extensive saltmarshes to the north and east of Wells town are, because of their size and lack of disturbance, among the best in the whole of Europe. Wells Salt Marsh, Lodge Marsh and Warham Salt Marshes cover an area of more than four square kilometres. Beyond them, at low water, stretches the vast remote area of tidal sandflats known as Bob Hall Sand. Saltmarshes usually develop behind the shelter of a dune or shingle ridge as has occurred at Scolt Head Island and Blakeney Point. The saltmarshes north of Wells are unusual in having no such protective barrier. Remote sand banks in this area provide nest sites for little terns and are a long-established winter roost site for up to 25,000 pink-footed geese.*



Opposite: Brent geese flying over Wells channel – the pines of East Hills are in the background.

Right: A male kestrel feeds on a chaffinch on a gate post at Wells.