

British Castles

February 2026



Castles Of East Anglia
Orford, Norwich & More





EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear all,

Welcome to the February 2026 issue whose theme is 'Castles Of East Anglia'.

East Anglia is the eastern region of England comprising Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and (usually) Essex known for its flat expanses of fens and wetlands.

It's also home to a wonderful variety of castles from Norman times to much later when a castle was more of a home than a fortress. Our first article, then, features our pick of the finest examples, including imposing Norwich Castle, decorative Castle Rising and homely Oxburgh Hall.

We then profile one of these, Castle Rising, in our regular feature on 'Lesser Known British Castles'. The castle, and the gorgeous Norfolk village around it of the same name, is both wonderful and reasonably unknown, and so you'll avoid the crowds. Plus the village has a great pub..

Our next feature is on East Anglia itself: what to do and see when you're not exploring the region's castles. From the picturesque Norfolk Broads to playing on the sands of Great Yarmouth there's something for everyone.

Our gallery contains some gorgeous photos of these places too. And our picture quiz tests whether you've been paying attention: how many of the photos of East Anglian locations mentioned in the issue can you identify?

Anyway the edition is packed as ever with awesome info and photos on an area which may not be familiar to you. I hope you enjoy the issue...

Chris



CASTLES OF EAST ANGLIA

OUR PICK OF THE BEST

East Anglia's landscape can look deceptively gentle: long horizons, slow rivers, and market towns that grew wealthy on farming and trade. Yet the region's castles tell a sharper story.

After 1066, strongholds were planted to secure new rule, police key routes, and make authority visible. In later centuries, castles became anchors of local Lordship, centres of administration, and, sometimes, fortified statements of status.

The coastline and river systems mattered too. East Anglia faced the North Sea world as much as inland England, and security concerns, commerce, and politics all left their mark on where fortifications rose and how they were built.

The sites below offer a quick tour through that changing medieval landscape, from major stone keeps to earthworks and moated, castle-like homes.

NORWICH CASTLE

A powerful Norman statement in the heart of a major medieval city, Norwich Castle was built soon after the Conquest to secure authority over an important regional centre.

Its great keep and prominent mound were designed to dominate the urban landscape physically and psychologically.

It's now home to a popular Museum and Art Gallery.



Norwich Castle

FRAMLINGHAM CASTLE

Framlingham is one of East Anglia's most significant castle complexes, closely tied to the politics of great noble families. Rather than a single-purpose fortress, Framlingham reflects the castle as a regional headquarters, part stronghold, part statement, shaped by shifting loyalties and the long rhythms of medieval Lordship.

Much of what survives today dates to the late 12th century, when the Bigod family rebuilt the site in stone, replacing earlier fortifications. Its most striking feature is the broad circuit of curtain wall, studded with mural towers, enclosing a large interior rather than centring on a single great keep. The castle later passed to the Howards, Dukes of Norfolk, and remained an important seat of power in the county.



Framlingham Castle

It also played an important role in Tudor history. In July 1553, after Edward VI's death and the attempt to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne, Mary (later Queen Mary I) gathered supporters at Framlingham Castle.

There she issued proclamations asserting her claim before moving toward London, where she was recognised as Queen.

CASTLE RISING

Castle Rising remains one of Norfolk's clearest examples of a mature stone castle that still looks like a fortress. Built as a compact, controlled stronghold, it reflects a world where power was exercised through a mix of defensible design and carefully managed space.

Its architecture signals permanence and authority as much as military readiness, showing how castles could function as the setting for rule, ceremony, and household administration.

It's the subject this month's 'Lesser Known British Castle' feature later in this issue.

ORFORD CASTLE

Orford is strongly associated with royal authority and the strategic concerns of a wealthy coastline facing the North Sea world. More than a private magnate's residence, it represents central power projecting itself into an economically important region.

Its distinctive design makes it an easy symbol of 'castle as statecraft': a building that communicates control over ports, trade routes, and a landscape that linked England to continental politics and maritime networks.



Orford Castle



Baconsthorpe Castle

BURGH CASTLE

Burgh Castle is a reminder that East Anglia's defences didn't begin with the Normans.

Its imposing Roman shore fort walls speak to much earlier anxieties about coastal threat and control.

CASTLE ACRE

Castle Acre began as a Norman foundation that grew into a major seat of Lordship.

It's a good example of how Norman Castles evolved starting with conquest-era speed and then gaining more elaborate defences and structures over time.

BACONSTHORPE CASTLE

Baconsthorpe captures a later medieval shift, when 'castle' could mean an impressive residence wrapped in the language of defence.

Baconsthorpe was never built as a fortress, it was never meant to defend anything, but to look like one.

Its moat and surviving towers suggest controlled access and protection, but also a strong element of display and household prestige.

It helps illustrate how elite architecture increasingly blended security with comfort, privacy, display and social theatre - with fortification as a setting for status as much as for conflict.

OXBURGH HALL

Oxburgh Hall is part castle and part country house: a moated, fortified home that borrows battlements and a defensive silhouette to project stability and rank.

Built in a period when local insecurity and social competition mattered, it shows how architecture could reassure and impress at once.



Oxburgh Hall

CLARE CASTLE

Clare Castle is another example of the widespread Norman pattern of establishing power through earthworks and a commanding site, later strengthened and adapted across generations. Associated with an influential Lordship, it offers a clear example of how early castles could be both practical strong-points and organising centres for local authority.

EYE CASTLE

Eye Castle is another East Anglian stronghold rooted in the early Norman period, tied to the creation of new power structures after 1066. Its prominent position reflects the importance of visibility: castles were meant to be seen, anchoring Lordship in both the landscape and local imagination.

HEDINGHAM CASTLE

Hedingham Castle is known for its exceptionally well-preserved Norman keep, making it one of the strongest visual links to early stone castle-building in England.

It's in the county of Essex which has a pretty naff reputation - but Hedingham shows it has just as many treasures as more celebrated East Anglian counties..



Hedingham Castle

QUIZ: EAST ANGLIA

See if you can match the East Anglian locations mentioned elsewhere in this issue with its photo. Answers on page 24.

Norwich

Framlingham Castle

Sutton Hoo

Clare Castle

Cambridge

Lavenham

Dedham Vale

Ely

Southwold

Aldeburgh

Great Yarmouth

Castle Rising

Norfolk Broads

Orford Castle





GALLERY: EAST ANGLIA



Framlingham Castle

Scallop, Aldeburgh





Lavenham

Cottage, Dedham Vale





Sailing On Norfolk Broads





Southwold



EAST ANGLIA

THE BEST THINGS TO DO & SEE

East Anglia is a wide sweep of coastline, rivers, market towns, and historic villages across Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire (often with Essex close by, depending on how you draw the map).

If you're looking for things to do beyond castles, the region is packed with straightforward, high-interest days out—waterways, seaside towns, major heritage sites, and places where medieval streetscapes still feel very intact.

NORWICH

Norwich is the region's centre, as well as being the county town of Norfolk, with a compact city core that's easy to explore on foot. In addition to the Castle, Norwich Cathedral is a headline sight: construction began in 1096, and much of what you see today is primarily Norman in character.

The cathedral sits within a large close, and the city around it has layers of medieval and later streets, markets, and riverside routes. Norwich also has a strong museum scene - such as the one hosted at the castle - and a long-established market tradition, so it works well as a base for exploring the wider county.

THE NORFOLK BROADS

The Norfolk Broads (although some are technically in Suffolk) are a group of lakes formed from long abandoned gravel pits. Local rivers such as the Bure and Yare have since filled up the pits creating a network of navigable waterways - rivers and shallow lakes (broads) - over the flat Norfolk landscape. As Britain's largest protected wetland - they have national park status.

It's a popular boating spot, and is packed with tourists in boats in summer, but the Broads also suit slower activities like walking, cycling on the flatter routes, and birdwatching in the surrounding reed-beds.

GREAT YARMOUTH

The first of three rather different seaside locations we feature here, Great Yarmouth is a great example of the old fashioned bright and breezy British seaside resort. The town grew up where the River Yare mentioned above empties into the North Sea.

Many British seaside towns such Scarborough, Brighton, Weymouth and Great Yarmouth became popular tourist destinations during the Victorian age, and often retain a 'amusements and ice cream on the sands' atmosphere from that time. It's a great place to visit if you want to promenade on the long seaside 'front', especially in summer; it is still a popular holiday destination.



Beach Huts Great Yarmouth

SOUTHWOLD

Southwold is quieter version of the East Anglian coastline. It's a classic Suffolk coastal town with a pier-and-lighthouse combination and a much more relaxed feel than Great Yarmouth.

Between the small town, pier - built in 1900 as a landing stage for steamships - and lighthouse, it's a straightforward place to explore without needing a long plan.

ALDEBURGH

Aldeburgh, another small Suffolk seaside town, offers a more cultured coastal experience. The home town of the composer Benjamin Britten hold regular arts festivals and is local foodie hub.

One manifestation of this arty influence is Scallop, the large stainless-steel sculpture on the Aldeburgh's long shingle beach. It's the work of sculptor Maggi Hambling and was installed in 2003. It's a fixed point for a coastal walk and easy to find from the town.

ELY

Moving away from the coast to the middle of the fenlands which form much of the region, to the town of Ely.

It's home to Ely Cathedral, often nicknamed the 'Ship of the Fens' because its towers dominate the flat surrounding landscape.

Construction of the present cathedral began in 1083 - the building is famous for its Octagon and lantern tower, created after the original central tower collapsed in 1322.

It's a lovely place and comparable to more famous great churches and cathedrals such as York Minster and Westminster Abbey.





Flatford Mill

CONSTABLE COUNTRY (DEDHAM VALE)

Dedham Vale sits along the River Stour on the Suffolk–Essex border and is a designated ‘Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty’. The area is closely associated with John Constable’s landscapes (you’ll often see “Constable Country” used locally), and it’s a reliable option if you want classic English countryside scenery, river views, and villages clustered around the Stour.

Some of the locations of some of Constable’s most famous works can still be visited today. Flatford Mill is a Field Studies centre now and a plaque marks the nearby spot where the Hay Wain, probably Constable’s most famous work, was painted.

CAMBRIDGE

To any self-respecting fan of England, Cambridge needs no introduction. Home to one of the world’s finest universities, its honey-coloured sandstone colleges backing on to the river Cam is one of the iconic scenes in England.

Its eponymous county, Cambridgeshire, is the smallest of the East Anglian counties but is still home to tens of pretty towns and villages such as Granchester, home of poet Rupert Brooke and the Bloomsbury set, and Ely mentioned elsewhere in this feature.

LAVENHAM

Lavenham, in south Suffolk, is full of quaint medieval and Tudor-era buildings, particularly timber-framed houses that reflect the wealth generated by the historic wool and cloth trade. This includes the famous 'crooked house'.

It's often described as one of England's best surviving wool towns," with many listed buildings in a small area.

The village centre is compact, so it's a good place for an unhurried walk taking in architecture, churches, and small independent shops.



SUTTON HOO

Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge in Suffolk, is the site of one of England's most important early medieval archaeological finds. In 1939, the site revealed a ship burial dating to the early 7th century, believed to belong to an Anglo-Saxon king, possibly Raedwald of East Anglia.

The burial contained an array of remarkable artefacts, including a ceremonial helmet, weapons, gold jewellery, and silverware, showcasing the craftsmanship and wealth of the period.

Sutton Hoo has greatly enhanced our understanding of Anglo-Saxon culture, society, and connections with the wider world. The treasures are now displayed at the British Museum, attracting global interest.

And the story of the site's discovery was made into a movie: 'The Dig' released in 2021 starring Ralph Fiennes, Carey Mulligan and Lily James.





LESSER KNOWN BRITISH CASTLES

CASTLE RISING

Just outside King's Lynn, in the village of Castle Rising, are the ruins of a large medieval castle noteworthy for its unusually detailed 12th-century Romanesque-style stone keep and the size of its surrounding earthworks.

Although much of Castle Rising is now in ruins, the main features are still visible: a gatehouse approach, several defensive enclosures, and the keep located in the inner area. The castle is open to the public and is owned and managed by Lord Howard of Rising, with English Heritage involved in its care and presentation.

Here's our guide...

WILLIAM D'ALBINI

A Norman lord William d'Albini (d'Aubigny) II, who gained status and wealth in the late 1130s, started the castle in 1138 during King Stephen's reign for his new wife, Adeliza of Louvain, who was the widow of King Henry I.

From the beginning, the site combined strong defences with high-status living spaces; it was both a fortress and a residence linked to a managed landscape that included a deer park.

The castle's location was also important; it sits only a few miles from King's Lynn, which was a significant port in the Middle Ages. Access in this low-lying area of Norfolk was closely tied to waterways and marshland routes.



Castle Rising

THE SITE

Castle Rising is larger than the single tower that many people imagine. The overall site includes three baileys, which are enclosed areas, protected by large banks and ditches, a total defended area of about 5 hectares.

The castle itself is surrounded by extensive earthworks, some of the most impressive in England, which cover 20 acres.

Hence the 'castle' consists not just of stone walls but also significant landscaping, including deep ditches, high embankments, and a layered design that would have slowed and directed movement.

The centrepiece is the great keep. Its Romanesque-style architectural detailing, such as pilaster buttresses and decorative arcading, makes it one of the more richly decorated Norman keeps to survive.



Inside Castle Rising

On the inside, features can still be traced or visited within the ruin, include the Great Hall and an associated decorated room. Even in its ruined state, the keep gives a strong sense of a large, formally arranged building with distinct upper-level rooms.

The ruins also include the remains of an early Norman church within the inner bailey, which pre-dates the castle. This helps explain why the castle area is not simply a military footprint; it overlaps with earlier settlement patterns and buildings already present on or near the chosen location.

OWNERSHIP

After its initial phase and early generations of ownership, Castle Rising passed through different hands, including de Montalt family in the 13th century.

It is particularly associated with Queen Isabella of France, the widow of Edward II and mother of Edward III. She acquired the castle after her fall from power in 1330, and lived there for a period afterwards.

Like many castles, it was not static: structures were maintained, adapted, or allowed to decline at different points depending on the priorities and resources of the owners.



Castle Rising Village

CASTLE RISING TODAY

Castle Rising is located in the pretty Suffolk village of the same name, which is itself part of the Sandringham Estate, owned by HRH King Charles.

The castle itself is open seasonally, with longer daily hours from April to November and admission is pretty cheap (£6 at the time of writing, less for concessions). Unlike more popular attractions it's unlikely to be too crowded. Dogs are generally welcome on leads in the grounds (assistance dogs welcome).

Afterwards enjoy a drink or grab a bite to eat at the village's Black Horse Inn, a lovely country pub...

Quiz Answers: 1. Ely; 2. Clare Castle; 3. Aldeburgh; 4. Castle Rising; 5. Cambridge; 6. Norwich; 7. Sutton Hoo; 8. Orford Castle; 9. Dedham Vale; 10. Norfolk Broads; 11. Great Yarmouth; 12. Framlingham Castle; 13. Southwold; 14. Lavenham



British Castles Magazine

published by british-castles.com