

Exploring Campsea Ashe



Introduction

Campsea Ashe is an East Suffolk village of about 350 souls and 1800 acres, lying eight miles inland, due west from Aldeburgh, and two miles due east of Wickham Market. Most of the village sits on comparatively elevated ground - about 25 metres (80 feet) above sea level - midway between the Rivers Ore to the north and Deben to the south, three miles or so upstream from where they both broaden into their distinctive wide estuaries. The eastern section of the B1078 road winds through the village from Wickham Market to Tunstall, where it crosses the B1069 Snape road, and continues on to join the B1084 from Woodbridge and meet the coast at Orford. The East Suffolk railway line runs through the village, and trains stop at the seemingly mis-named Wickham Market station to carry passengers either southwards to Ipswich and London Liverpool Street, a journey of some 85 miles in total, or northwards to Halesworth and Lowestoft, 35 miles or so further along the coast.

The origins of the village name have become lost in the passage of time, but the simplest derivation may stem from a combination of it having been an ancient settlement or 'camp' set amongst ash trees. Spelling variants have also abounded through historical sources, and include Ashe juxta Campessy and Ash by Campsey as well as the individual names Campesse, Capsea, Camesy, Ayssch, Asshe and so on. Even today the village answers either to 'Campsea Ashe' or 'Campsey Ash', though the former is by far the more generally used.

First impressions of Campsea Ashe might be of an unobtrusive, rather unremarkable scattering of houses old and new, amongst farmsteads and parkland, passed through *en route* to the attractions of the coastal forest belt, quaint seaside towns or perhaps the world-renowned Aldeburgh Festival. The motorist may notice the sale yard, the vestiges of railway buildings – including what is now the village pub – the sweep of the railway bridge itself, and the church with its high square tower, simple war memorial and adjacent old rectory. But, as with so many English backwaters, behind these lies a rich history of people and events receding centuries into the past, and leaving a bedrock for its present and future inhabitants.

Visitors to the 14th Century **Church of St John the Baptist** will find much of interest, described in the small church guide. Entering through the 1937 coronation Lych Gate, visitors will find a well proportioned building of knapped flint with its 76 foot Tower complementing the long Nave and Chancel. The church itself is entered through a porch at the south-west: it is pleasantly light and welcoming, but nonetheless retains a quiet dignity. The total interior is 113 feet in length, and contains a number of striking monuments and a brass of Sir Alexander Inglisshe set in the nave near the chancel step. There are also several stained glass windows of note, including one to the memory of The Hon. Mr William Lowther (1855-1949) of Campsea Ashe High House, who was speaker of the House of Commons between 1905 and 1921 before being elevated to the upper chamber as Viscount Ullswater.

Exploring Campsea Ashe (1) – The Blackstock Crossing Trail

Campsea Ashe is best explored using the specially commissioned and informative Heritage Trails. The first of these is the Blackstock Crossing Trail which follows a roughly anti-clockwise route north-eastwards from the church and its associated buildings, skirts the western edge of the High House Estate, formerly the home of Viscount Ullswater and his family, and returns by doubling back across the railway – firstly at Blackstock Crossing and for the second time under the Marlesford Road bridge. The trail starts from the old village blacksmith's cottage and the nearby 'Triangle' with the Village Sign, first erected in 1937 - along with the church Lych Gate - and restored in 1996. Close by, set in the hedgerow along the north side of the churchyard facing the road, is the War Memorial commemorating 17 fallen servicemen from the Great War.

Turning eastwards along the Tunstall Road, along the stretch between the Regency White House (1837) and the old Victorian **School House**, there is a glimpse down into The Pit, a sand quarry disused since the end of the 18th Century. It now contains a small cluster of cottages, the oldest ones of flint and dating back to 1807. At the turn of the 19th-20th century several small businesses were thriving in and around The Pit, including a small village store and a farrier / harness-maker. A little further along the Tunstall Road is The Hame, a distinctive country house and home of three maiden sisters, Julia, Violet and Evelyn Reade, who moved there in 1913 just after it had been built for them by the Lowther family, with whom they were friends.

Beyond The Hame the former **High House Estate** stretches away to the right hand side of the road. Much of it is now turned over to agricultural use, though there is enough remaining as park land to indicate its former status, in fact reckoned to be one of the oldest deer parks in Suffolk as it dates back to Tudor times or earlier. A pair of gates denoted 'Ashe House' mounted on white brick pillars mark the start of a majestic avenue of lime trees which extends back some 500 yards to where the mansion once stood. William Lowther bought the High House and its estate in 1882, and in their heyday the gardens are believed to have been heavily influenced by the work of Gertrude Jekyll, having featured long 'canals', and an arboretum of elms, horse chestnuts and cedars, many of which are still in place. These are not visible from the Blackstock Crossing Trail, but some evidence of the estate beyond the gates is traceable from the irregular depressions in the parkland, probable sites of former fishponds.

The original 'High House' was built in the 16th Century and was owned by the Glover family, aristocrats associated with Queen Elizabeth's court. Tragedy was to strike the family in 1641 when one William Glover was murdered – 'unhappily slain' by two persons – at the White Hart Inn in Wickham Market. Ten years later the estate was sold to the Sheppard family of Mendlesham (15 miles to the north-west in Suffolk) whose descendants owned it through to the end of the 19th Century. The last member of the Sheppard family to have owned the High House was J G Sheppard who was foreman of the famous 'Tichbourne trial' of 1871 which ran from May until the end of August, dealing with a disputed inheritance. The mental and physical strain of the trial is said to have broken Sheppard, and its notoriety has resonances with the *Jarndyce* affairs in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. The 'High House' itself - so named because the original building was four stories high – was demolished in 1953 after the rest of the estate was sold and the remaining coach house and stable buildings have now been converted into housing.

Along the road signposted to Blaxhall and Snape the countryside becomes essentially agricultural, with a gamekeeper's spinney to the right before open fields. A little further up the road is another disused pit whose origins remain a mystery. Turning left at the Red House Farm junction, the Trail continues westerly towards **Blackstock Crossing**, and along this section it is possible to savour the 'classic' Suffolk countryside: gently undulating countryside with large open fields stretching across to a distant tree line, isolated brick cottages and the distant church tower – all under the huge Suffolk sky. The views are interrupted by the double line of high-voltage pylons which were erected in the 1960s, running at up to 400,000 volts to feed power into the National Grid from the Sizewell nuclear power station near Leiston, over 10 miles away to the east. Beyond the pylons the lane descends to another wooded spinney, Blackstock Wood with its part-natural and

part-managed drainage ponds and brooks that feed into the River Ore, taking run-off eventually to the River Alde and out to sea at Orford.

At Blackstock Crossing there is a tiny railwayman's cottage. This is where the former **Framlingham Branch Line** turned northwest from a simple set of points - the so-called "Wickham Market Junction" – immediately beyond the crossing in the Saxmundham direction. The branch line was built in 1859 (along with the rest of the Ipswich to Halesworth rail link, completing the East Coast line from London Liverpool Street to Lowestoft), but closed to passengers in 1952 and for freight in 1965. Along the ancient Blackstock Lane there are views to the left, southwards across to Jolly's Farm and the church, and you can hear the distant rush of traffic on the main A12 trunk road, a mile away to the north beyond the horizon.

Well House Cottages mark the site of one of the village pumps at the crossroads where Blackstock Lane intersects the Marlesford Road. The cottages are now a single dwelling but were formerly a pair dating back at least 200 years. Returning to the village under the power lines again, viewed to the left is a perfectly straight run of pylons as far as the eye can see, coming across the countryside from Sizewell. Crossing the railway again, approaching the dip under the Marlesford Road railway arch, the church tower with its small white-painted 'spirelet' comes into view. Beyond the arch is **Bucks Head Cottage** which was an Inn for at least 100 years – and reputedly frequented by smugglers - until the 1950s when it was converted to a private house. Immediately behind Bucks Head Cottage a steep track drops down into The Pit, but the road soon rejoins the B1078 Tunstall Road on its way back to the church.

Beyond the church to its right is **The Old Rectory**, an imposing 18th Century parsonage with a wide frontage. It was refurbished in 1826, and again from 1906 onwards, to become described by its then occupier as "a very charming and comfortable house, with a delightful garden and other amenities". The Rectory was used as the headquarters and billets for the Women's Land Army during the Second World War, but ceased to be the home of the incumbent rectors in 1951 when it was sold to become a private residence and small B&B hotel, which it remains. Next door to the Rectory is the so-called "**Iron Room**", for a long time the Village Hall and community meeting place. Literally constructed from corrugated iron, this little building was used as a hospital during the Great War.

Exploring Campsea Ashe (2) – The Ash Row Trail

The second village Heritage Trail explores the village to the west of the church, following a roughly circular route round to "Hellfire Corner" and back along Mill Lane. Passing the Old Rectory and the Iron Room, the road rises over the **Railway Bridge** towards Wickham Market. The railway bridge was originally built in 1902 on the site of the former level crossing, as part of the 'down-line' platform extension work. Some vestiges of the old access road to the level crossing are visible down to the left as you ascend the curved slope of the bridge. Viewed from the top of the bridge, having come from the church, the line to the left goes south towards Woodbridge and Ipswich; to the right it goes towards Saxmundham and Lowestoft. There is also a good view down to the station from the railway bridge, and it can be seen that the former goods yards, sidings and platforms had been quite extensive before the East Suffolk line was reduced to single track in the 1980s.

It is worth walking on to the station platform itself to spend a moment imagining how busy it had been in its heyday. **Wickham Market Station** (sign-boarded "Wickham Market for Campsea Ashe") was dual track, with an up-line and a down-line - each with its own platform - a signal box and numerous sidings and goods facilities. Services for passengers included a ticket office, waiting room and bookstall, and the nearby Talbot Hotel (now "The Dog and Duck" village pub). There was especially ample provision for loading goods and livestock to and from the agricultural hinterland, and even ramps for military vehicles during the Second World War. Some vestiges of this infrastructure can be traced today.

The line itself, together with branch lines to Framlingham, Snape and Aldeburgh, was completed in 1859 and train services started on 1 June that year – towards the end of the period of 'Railway Mania' that swept Britain during the early part of the 19th Century. The section of line between Ipswich and Halesworth completed the East Suffolk link from the Liverpool Street to Cambridge line

to the south west, and the Halesworth, Beccles & Haddiscoe lines further north, with its onward links to Norwich. The railway was instigated by the 1855 *East Suffolk Railway Company Prospectus* of Sir Samuel Morton Peto, under the chairmanship of the Earl of Stradbroke, and to be funded by a number of prominent local dignitaries; Sir Samuel Peto was already the proprietor of the Halesworth, Beccles & Haddiscoe railway and wished to extend his interests.

Originally the East Suffolk Railway, the line became administered by the Great Eastern Railway (GER) in 1862, followed by the London & North Eastern Railway (LNER) in 1923, and British Railways Eastern Region on nationalisation in 1948. The railway was 'privatised' under the Railways Act of 1993.

Passing the village hall on the right, proudly signposted the "**Victory Hall**" to commemorate the end of hostilities in 1945, when it was built, the **Dog and Duck** pub sits in the crook of the sharp right-hand bend which takes the road along to the Auction Rooms and Market. These catered for both livestock and 'deadstock' until the 1990s but has now become a thriving saleroom – open to the public on Mondays and Wednesdays - for furniture, household goods, vegetables and other assorted market trading. The larger sheds on the market site were used for the sale of farm animals and poultry as well as produce and general goods. Much of this sale produce, including the livestock, was brought into Campsea Ashe by rail.

Immediately beyond the Auction Rooms the road runs beneath the double line of pylons and passes Ash Row and the Village Stores, starting a shallow descent towards **Hellfire Corner** – otherwise known as "Hell Bend". Possibly the site of an ancient warning beacon, this position affords good views down into the River Deben flood plain and its osier beds. Part of the reason the railway was routed eastwards through Campsea Ashe instead of Wickham Market was to avoid the low-lying wetlands beside the River Deben. Approaching Mission Cottages, the former village Reading Room built by the Sheppard family in 1880, at the junction with **Mill Lane**, there is also a distant view to the distinctive 140-foot spire of All Saints Church in Wickham Market, two miles away to the west. Across to the right, looking north, is a view of the small village of Marlesford nestling just beyond the A12 trunk road.

At Hellfire Corner the road turns very sharply to the right on its way down the edge of the river bluff to Lower Hacheston and Wickham Market, but the Trail route turns left into Mill Lane, signposted Loudham and Rendlesham. This is another typically rural Suffolk lane, with farm buildings and wide views beyond the hedges, but the close proximity of the pylons and new housing across the field to the left – looking south – mark the encroachment of the modern world. Mill Lane is inevitably named because of the former Mill that stood nearby, though this has long since disappeared. The road continues past a crossroads towards Loudham and the old **Ashe Abbey** site on the banks of the Deben, but Mill Lane itself takes the left turn back into the village. The right-turn of the crossroads is now the driveway of Quill Farm – an ancient footpath connecting the village to Wickham Market, and no longer a public road.

The Trail returns towards the *Dog and Duck* past Millville Cottages, built at the start of the 20th Century ("Millville" is dated 1901) and then between a line of several semi-detached bungalows and a dozen or so 1970s detached houses, representing the main residential development in the village since the war. This was once the area known as Little & Great Horsey. Along here are two significant road names: *Chantry Gardens* commemorating the small 'chantry college' linked in antiquity to Ash Abbey, and founded by Maud, the Countess of Ulster, in 1348, and secondly *Ullswater Road* in honour of Viscount Ullswater, the title taken in 1921 by James Lowther of Campsea Ashe High House until his death in 1949.

Immediately opposite the Dog and Duck are the houses of **Railway Terrace**, built for railway employees at the time of the railway in the mid 19th Century. Campsea Ashe has the sad distinction of having to record a civilian death in its Roll of Honour for the Second World War as the young mother-to-be Iris Mabel Driver of No. 2 Railway Cottages was killed when a German bomb fell on the village in 1940. Her name is inscribed on the church war memorial plaque along with six servicemen also killed. At this point the road rejoins the B1078 and the visitor can retrace his steps over the railway bridge and back to the church.