

# Chapter 1

## Red Herrings

*Great Yarmouth, Norfolk*

*The strangest place in the wide world.*

Charles Dickens

The Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu is attributed with saying that ‘a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’. My own journey, less than half that distance, began with 217 of them: the narrow stone steps that twist up the spiral staircase of Great Yarmouth’s Britannia Monument.

I had long wanted to get a gull’s-eye view of the Norfolk coast from the top of the tall monument that commemorates Admiral Horatio Nelson, the county’s go-to hero. With this in mind, my wife Jackie and I took advantage of the town’s annual heritage weekend, when doors that are ordinarily locked are flung open for members of the public. The Britannia Monument was among those offering a rare opportunity for anyone with sufficient lung capacity to climb its vertiginous internal staircase.

We waited at the entrance while a few other visitors made their way in twos and threes up to the viewing platform that sits immediately below the statue of Britannia on her plinth. When our turn came we ascended in the company of a local biker, a man in early middle age who, despite a fierce demeanour prompted by an almost neckless shaved head, Gothic-lettered tattoos and head-to-toe black leather, seemed amicable enough as we climbed the steps together.

## *Red Herrings*

By the time we reached the top of the staircase our calf muscles were complaining and our hearts, unaccustomed to steep ascents in normally horizontal Norfolk, were thumping hard. The view, whilst panoramic, was just a little disappointing: a window on a world sub-divided into small squares by the protective wire cage installed to prevent seabirds roosting.

We already knew that Britannia and the caryatids that support her are fibreglass replacements of the Coade stone originals. The Roman goddess's original head now resides at the town's Time and Tide Museum, while the six caryatids have somehow found their way as architectural salvage to the grounds of Ketteringham Hall twenty miles to the west, a country seat that, like many others of its kind, has latterly been repurposed as a wedding venue. But we had underestimated the disheartening effect that the all-encompassing mesh would have on our appreciation of the view, which was akin to that seen by a chicken in a coup, albeit one perched aloft a forty-metre-high Doric column.

From our high viewpoint it was clear that Yarmouth developed on a sand spit, a narrow finger of land squeezed between the North Sea and the River Yare that points accusingly southwards in the direction of Lowestoft. Modern housing and light industry have long filled in the space between the river and the sea, and an industrial estate now surrounds the base of the column, but when the monument was first erected in the second decade of the 19th century, to commemorate Nelson's maritime victories, it stood alone on a fishing beach, isolated from the town to the north.

Looking south, we could see the mouth of the River Yare at Gorleston. Just beyond were the Suffolk border and a cluster of holiday villages before the sprawl of Yarmouth's historic rival, Lowestoft, Britain's most easterly town. Further south still was the prim resort of Southwold, which, like its neighbours Dunwich and Walberswick, was once a mighty port before

## *Westering*

silting and coastal erosion took their toll. To the east lay the taut curve of the North Sea – a wave-flecked, grey-green expanse that diminished to a hazy vanishing point. A cluster of wind turbines, their blades almost immobile on this calm late-summer day, stood someway offshore at Scroby Sands. Across the water, far beyond the horizon, unseen even from our elevated viewpoint, were the polders and dykes of the Netherlands, a country that once had close economic ties with this easternmost part of England.

Some impulse had me imagining a time before the rising sea levels that followed the last glacial period, a time when a land bridge still connected Britain to Europe. Doggerland, as the territory has become known, now lies beneath the waves but it was a land of plenty just a few thousand years ago, roamed by mammoths, bison and small bands of Mesolithic hunters.

Our biker companion chatted amiably, pointing out landmarks that were familiar to him from his childhood on Cobholm Island, an outlying Yarmouth district that is no longer an island but part of Southtown on the west bank of the River Yare. Gesturing towards the water tower in Caister-on-Sea to the north, he showed us where his uncle used to keep watch during World War II. Great Yarmouth was bombed sporadically by the Luftwaffe throughout the war, its east-coast location making it a convenient dumping ground for surplus bombs on the fuel-short leg back to Germany. The town, he opined, was nothing like it used to be during its heyday. Anyone from Yarmouth over the age of forty-five would probably say much the same. The town's decline over the past few decades has been multi-faceted: the once-thriving fishing industry has collapsed, summer visitors to the town's beaches have decreased dramatically since cheap package holidays in the Mediterranean became available to all and, more recently, the lucrative service industry for the North Sea oil rigs has largely relocated to Aberdeen.

## *Red Herrings*

Rotating awkwardly in the confined space of the viewing deck, we turned to gaze inland at the wide silver snake of Breydon Water, the gleaming, bird-rich estuary that the Yare and Bure rivers flow into before the channel narrows past Yarmouth's South Quay on its way to the sea. On a clear day, you might just about make out the spire of Norwich Cathedral twenty miles to the west. Today though, a blue haze limited the view beyond the glimmering mud of the estuary.

Viewed from the ground, the caryatids, suitably draped in classical togas, had appeared to be playing quoits with unseen partners, but a closer look revealed that the circular objects held in their right hands are laurel wreaths. Standing above these fibreglass figures is an aloof Britannia, hedging her bets by offering an olive branch of peace in one hand and a war trident in the other. The Sphinx-like mystery that surrounds this monument is, as any local might tell you, the question of why Britannia faces inland rather than out to sea. The standard explanation is that she looks towards Nelson's birthplace at Burnham Thorpe across the county to the northwest, but a less generous interpretation suggests that her orientation was simply a mistake and that the architect, William Wilkins, horrified by his error, took his own life by throwing himself from the top of the column. This is untrue: Wilkins went on to design many more illustrious monuments in the years that followed – although a careless acrobat really did fall from the top in 1863 after slipping from Britannia's shoulders during a foolhardy display of what now might be called extreme parkour. There was also an earlier casualty when the superintendent of works (and Yarmouth's first librarian), Thomas Sutton, suffered a fatal heart attack whilst inspecting the top of the monument shortly before its completion in 1819. Clearly, the ascent was too much for him. As casual visitors we had been duly warned: the steps were only to be ascended by those without 'heart, lung or mobility problems'.

## Westering

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Yarmouth was at its peak as a successful port during the Nelson glory years, although the town was already thriving well before the wars with France and Spain that made the Norfolk-born admiral a household name. Daniel Defoe visited the town almost a century earlier, when the herring industry was at its zenith, and had only words of praise for it. Writing in his 1724 odyssey *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies*, he noted:

*Yarmouth is an ancient town, much older than Norwich; and at present, tho' not standing on so much ground, yet better built; much more compleat; for number of inhabitants, not much inferior; and for wealth, trade, and advantage of its situation, infinitely superior to Norwich.*

Defoe's contemporary, William Cobbett, was similarly impressed with what he found, writing, 'in all my life I never saw a set of men more worthy of my respect and gratitude'. On his departure from the town he left his 'best wishes for the happiness of all its inhabitants, even the parsons not excepted'. For the fervently anti-cleric Cobbett to include men of the cloth was praise indeed. Charles Dickens, too, who stayed for a short time at Yarmouth's Royal Hotel during 1849 whilst writing his semi-autobiographical and 'favourite child' *David Copperfield*, had sufficient affection for the town for his character Peggotty to declare it as the 'finest place in the universe'. The fictional setting for the Peggotty household, a ramshackle but welcoming upturned boat-hut on the beach, was clearly inspired by what the author witnessed here. Nowadays, there are no fishing boats on the sand, upturned or otherwise, only deckchair merchants, although Peggotty's name has since been immortalised in a road name and a pub on King Street. Peggotty's enthusiasm

## *Red Herrings*

aside, the long journey from the capital and Yarmouth's relative isolation may have influenced Dickens' own perception of the town, describing it as 'the strangest place in the wide world, one hundred and forty-six miles of hill-less marsh between it and London'.

For centuries the herring was king here, and these 'silver darlings' were the main source of the town's prosperity. Vast quantities were caught offshore and salted, smoked and barrelled on Yarmouth's quays; and every year gangs of Scottish fisher girls would migrate down the coast for the work, their fingers perpetually raw and reeking as they skilfully gutted herrings and tossed them into barrels filled with salt. We had already seen fuzzy black and white photographs of these doughty women in the town's Time and Tide Museum – pale, bonneted faces blurred by movement and slow shutter speeds – and perused the display boards that told of Yarmouth's seafaring past. The museum also has a room devoted to the town's halcyon days as a holiday resort: there are photomontages of happy day-trippers strolling along Marine Parade, children in knitted swimwear with Mister Whippy ice-creams on the beach; collections of saucy McGill postcards, the essential post-war iconography of the English seaside holiday. (Red-faced man to curvaceous young woman in newsagent: 'Do you keep stationery, Miss?' 'No Love – I wriggle a bit.')

But it was herrings – in particular 'red herrings' kippered by salting and smoking – that were the key to the town and, although the bottom has long since dropped out of the fishing industry, there is still the tang of honest commerce about the place. A trace of red herrings, too: the bare brick interior of the Time and Tide Museum, housed in what was once a smoke-house, is still strongly redolent of kippers, an olfactory ghost that serves as an oddly appetising reminder of a prosperous past.

The Scottish herring girls were fishing port nomads who stayed for just a matter of weeks on their migratory route up and down

## *Westering*

the North Sea coast. In more recent decades, migrants have come to stay for much longer periods, settling down to live, work and raise children. A small Greek community has lived in Yarmouth since the 1940s, but in recent years other European migrants have outnumbered them: citizens of EU member states obliged to tick the ‘Other White’ box on government census forms – Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians and, most especially, Portuguese.

Their arrival coincided with the downturn in the town’s fortunes that accompanied the global recession of 2008–09. Recruited by international human resource agencies that promised much but delivered little, many of the new migrants came to labour in the area’s food processing plants – hard, unpleasant, poorly paid work that many of the ‘indigenous’ locals would not go near. Away from the seafront, the Portuguese presence is now quite visible, the sizeable community having set up its own food supermarkets and cafés in premises otherwise destined to become charity shops or pound stores.

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After spiralling down the Britannia Monument’s staircase, we headed for the seafront. Flitting about in the dunes behind the Pleasure Beach amusement park was a small party of wheatears, freshly landed from breeding grounds to the north. Bulging out into the North Sea like an eight-pint-a-night beer belly, the Norfolk coast is first landfall for many migratory birds fleeing harsher climes to the north and east. Periodically, one of the elegant grey and black birds perched fleetingly on a concrete fence posts to get its bearings, brilliant white rump flashing like a beacon as it eyed the herring gulls that swaggered around like mobsters protecting their patch. Across the road on the wall of Lacons Brewery, a large sign depicting the firm’s emblem, a pouncing falcon, talons outstretched for the kill, gave the exhausted new arrivals further cause for anxiety.

## *Red Herrings*

This was good timing on our part as the wheatears would not be here for long, just for time enough to refuel before the next leg on their long migration south. These birds had probably spent the summer somewhere in Scandinavia but were now intent on escaping the impending winter that would soon freeze the territory where they raised their young. It was remarkable to think that every single one of their species – wheatears from Greenland, Europe and Siberia, or even those that had bred in Canada and Alaska – were all heading for the same destination: sub-Saharan Africa. For birds from northern Europe, it is a long and dangerous journey; for those flying from Alaska or eastern Siberia, it is one of the longest migrations in the avian world.

A familiar sight on moorland in the north and west of the UK, we could claim wheatears as one of our own: a native breeding species. But where was home to the birds? The wide belt of suitable breeding habitat that stretched across the northern hemisphere from one side of the world map to the other, or their commonly shared African wintering ground? As humans in this modern, mobile age, many of us accustomed to regular movement or, less fortunate, forced to migrate by political or economic circumstances, we might well ask the same question.

We took a short walk down to the beach. Whatever your taste in seaside towns, it is undeniable that Great Yarmouth possesses an outstanding stretch of shoreline – an extensive beach of fine golden sand that might be the envy of many an upmarket resort. The perfect place to build a sandcastle, slump in a deckchair, swim or paddle, Yarmouth is, after all, a town that has risen from a depositional spit; it is a place built *on* sand.

The tide had recently turned and the sand was still moist, darkened to the colour of Demerara sugar. We walked to the tide's edge, a gentle sougling of rippled water that shimmered in the bright September sunshine. I picked up a stone that took my eye – a sea-smoothed brown pebble the size and shape of a

## Westering

half-used bar of soap. The pebble's reassuring mass sat comfortably in my palm. I slipped it into my pocket – a talisman, a marker of place.

Further along South Parade, we passed a line of horse-towed carriages waiting patiently for customers, although trade seemed sluggish. A fortune teller's hut, wedged in the barbed-wire protected wall of Merrivale Model Village, Railway & Gardens, bore the legend: *LENA PETULENGRO, ROMANY PALMIST – Lena has read the hands of many Stars and Celebrities of Radio and T.V. All Have Had The Benefit Of Her Advice. VISIT HER NOW.* But Lena's door and fly-screen curtain were uninvitingly closed; the palmist had gone for lunch.

A little way beyond the entrance to Wellington Pier stands the intricate Victorian wrought-iron framework of the Winter Gardens, the last remaining building of its type in the country. Impressive but now empty and neglected, the structure resembles a giant multi-storey conservatory in need of a paint job: a potential future Eden Project in waiting (this is still one council member's dream), if only the necessary funding could be raised. Although it looks perfectly at home here on the North Sea coast, the building was a blow-in from the southwest. Originally constructed in Torquay, it stood in that resort for twenty-four years before being carefully dismantled and barged around the coast in 1903 to take up residence here alongside Yarmouth's then brand-new Wellington Pier.

Across the road from the Winter Gardens, the Windmill Theatre has a facsimile set of sails attached to its façade in impersonation of the Moulin Rouge in Paris, although it is doubtful if the floor show here was ever quite as racy as its French equivalent. Back in the 1950s, this building – which started life as The Gem, the country's first electric picture house – hosted George Formby summer residencies. The Norfolk coast and the nearby Broads had become a second home for Formby in his twilight

## *Red Herrings*

years when, rather than old-fashioned variety, public taste was starting to demand a more exciting, rock n' roll flavour for its entertainment. But the entertainer and his ukulele always had a loyal following here on the Norfolk coast, where tastes were more down to earth. It did not take much imagination to turn the clock back to Yarmouth's heyday and picture a grinning, Brylcreemed Formby strolling along this very same seafront in pullover and baggy flannels as he dreamed up double-entendres in the briny air.

Much of the Yarmouth that would have been familiar to Formby is still evident: the beach, the town's 'Golden Mile' of amusement arcades, the miniature golf courses and pleasure gardens, the fast food outlets that gift the seafront a pungent cocktail of chip fat and fried onions (with notes of biodegraded phytoplankton from the beach and horse shit from the pony-drawn landaus). Such attributes are not as popular as they once were, but the town's latter-day decline is the familiar story of many English seaside resorts in the late 20th century. The beach is still as pristine as ever, but a number of the town's once-flourishing entertainment palaces now lie empty and abandoned. The Empire was one such place, a former theatre that lacked both audience and, until recently, a full complement of letters above its art nouveau doorway, its former terracotta cladding stripped and once-proud colonial name reduced by weathering and gravity to read 'EMPI'. Although touted by some as an ideal venue for a future art gallery, it still stands empty and unloved.

Away from the seafront, opposite the marketplace, another of the town's institutions was open to the public for the heritage weekend. The Great Yarmouth Fishermen's Hospital, a cosy quadrangle of terraced cottages arranged around a gravelled courtyard, is not a hospital in the modern sense but an historic set of almshouses. Standing above the cottages' central entrance is a cupola with a statue of St Peter, the patron saint of fishermen.

## Westering

The saint, naked but for a fisherman's hat and a fold of robe, gazes towards the market place, stroking his beard absent-mindedly as if contemplating the day's catch on sale at the fish stalls. An eroded stone plaque above the doorway announces in lapidary copper script: *An Hospital For Decayed Fishermen founded by The Corporation 1702*. The plaster of the pediment above the doorway bears a sailing vessel on the waves. A later consultation with the appropriate Pevsner guide spoke of a detail that had gone unnoticed: the billowing sails of the ship indicate it to be sailing backwards, an unkind symbol for what such an institution represented – old salts all heading in the wrong direction, sailing slowly towards old age, decrepitude and death.

It was a short walk from the hospital to the Church – Minster, no less – of St Nicholas. Along the way we passed the birthplace of Anna Sewell, author of *Black Beauty*, a neat cottage sequestered away from the hoi polloi and suitably blue-plaqued. Close by, another more run-down looking residence displayed a protest from its window that made up for spelling imprecision with revolutionary zeal: *POLITITIAN'S ARE CORPORATE SLAGS, INJUSTICE IS NOT AN OPTION ITS A CHOICE*. A smaller, more instructional, sticker with a *V for Vendetta* mask simply urged *DO NOT OBEY*.

St Nicholas' is a post-war Gothic facsimile, albeit a convincing one: a comprehensive 1961 rebuild of the original medieval structure that was bombed and burned out in 1942 to leave only its outer walls and tower. Propped up in the rose beds in front of the entrance was an art installation that required visitors to pass beneath an arch of glittering silver fish – an aluminium foil shoal of herrings, the town's latter-day totem.

The interior of the building shimmered with light, modern stained glass panels filtering beams of sunlight to dapple the pews blue and yellow. In keeping with the church's modernist style, the Stations of the Cross were depicted by quasi-cubist paintings

## *Red Herrings*

in a Yarmouth setting: Christ on the seafront with a backdrop of trawlers out to sea; a tortured Christ dragging his cross past the NatWest bank; blue-uniformed policemen holding back the crowd in front of Dave's Diner as Christ processed to his fate; a safety-helmeted workman hammering in the nails; Christ on Golgotha attended by herring gulls. It was an engaging juxtaposition of place and time, of ancient and modern, of sacred and profane. If, as claimed, Norfolk's pilgrimage shrine village of Little Walsingham represents 'England's Nazareth' then is there any chance that Great Yarmouth might be similarly repackaged as some sort of east-coast Jerusalem?

We wandered back to the bus station at Market Gates to catch the XI back to Norwich. Today was just a preamble: all of Norfolk lay ahead to be walked. Not only Norfolk, either, but the entire breadth of the country, all the way west until I reached another coast in Wales.

It seemed a good place to start out from. Great Yarmouth is more or less the most easterly point of Norfolk, a flat, watery county of rivers, marshes and seashore. Bound by the North Sea to the north and east, and to the northwest by the wide bay of The Wash, the county's southern frontier is also liquid – a natural boundary marked by the Waveney and Ouse rivers that delineate the border with Suffolk. The two rivers emerge from the same south Norfolk bog to flow east and west respectively. A chance flood on the road that divides the two sources and the county would effectively become an island. Shape shifting has always been one of Norfolk's characteristics.

It may have been fanciful but the notion of 'island' rang true. There is something of an island mentality to the county where I have spent most of my adult life: a defiant attitude, an inherent stubbornness, an insistence on being a bit different even from its closest neighbours. It is the part of the country that I know best, but there is still a mystery to it. But if Yarmouth, as Dickens

## *Westering*

asserted, is ‘the strangest of places’, what can you say about the rest of the county? Norwich, where I live, is, as its road sign suggests, ‘a fine city’ but before I reached it there were miles of open country to be traversed. Marshes and broads, rivers and reed beds; cornfields and cattle, flat terrain and big skies – here was the Norfolk that kept to the approved script. Was this the Norfolk that would meet expectations?