

A Step back in Time

*The village of Lavenham may be Suffolk's best kept secret. Packed with history, character, and delicious afternoon teas, it couldn't be any more charming. **Giselle Whiteaker** strolls into the medieval past.*



Driving into Lavenham in Suffolk is like barreling into a time warp that shoots you back to medieval times. The high street is lined with impeccably maintained half-timbered houses in a variety of shades, their quaint cottage gardens a manicured riot of colour. The sky is powder-blue and the sun is making an appearance, casting a warm glow over the historical scene before us. "There it is," says my friend Judy and we pull up in front of the magnificent Swan Hotel, the hanging baskets of brightly coloured geraniums providing a pop of colour against the sepia-toned structure.

Usually keen on carrying my own bags, I take a look at the stairs and low beams – padded for safety – and happily leave the luggage at reception for delivery. The interior of the 15th-Century Swan Hotel exudes history. If these walls could talk there would be tales

of knights and heroic deeds, fair maidens and gallant heroes. Packed with oak-beamed character, open fires, spacious lounges and cosy nooks, this is the perfect place to sneak into a corner and partake of an indulgent afternoon tea.

We avert our gazes from the decadent cakes and scones whispering our names and wind our way into the heart of the building to our gorgeous suite. Every room here is slightly different to the next, making them feel utterly personal, as charming as they are comfortable. I'm tempted to curl up on the sofa with a book and simply soak up the atmosphere, but I'm also keen to explore the village. Outside the window a pigeon coos as if urging us into the sunshine. We accept this sage advice.

Lavenham was one a famous wool town, enjoying such a high standing that in the reign of Henry VIII it



Swan at Lavenham

Check The Swan's website for details of the new Weavers' House Spa opening in December. theswanatlavenham.co.uk.



The picturesque streets of Lavenham



The house used for Harry Potter's birthplace

was ranked as the 14th wealthiest town in England. The prosperity is evident in the size of the properties as we weave towards Market Place. This cobbled square is framed by spectacular edifices including the gleaming white National Trust Lavenham Guildhall of Corpus Christi, now a museum which outlines the changing fortunes of Lavenham's cloth industry, local families, and farming heritage.

From here, streets radiate away from the centre, each packed with crooked houses leaning against each other in higgledy-piggledy rows, bulging over the street. The village's appearance has changed little in five centuries, which may be why Lavenham has been described as the "finest medieval town in England", with more than 300 buildings listed as being of architectural and historical interest. For the modern-minded, there are plenty of art galleries, boutiques and tearooms, as well as the delightfully contemporary Chilli and Chives café. Harry Potter fans will be interested to know that Lavenham was the film location for scenes in Godric's Hollow, the birthplace of both Harry Potter and his wizarding headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. The village certainly has a magical air about it.

Before dinner, we settle in one of the nooks at The Swan and chat over crisp glasses of white wine and a trio of complimentary canapés. We have booked in for dinner at the hotel's elegant AA two Rosette Gallery Restaurant, which focuses on fresh, seasonal and locally-sourced food. Delicacies include pan-fried cod with spicy lentils and tempura of purple sprouting and roasted curried squashes and pumpkin, but I can't go past the "Celebration of Suffolk lamb", a serving of braised shoulder, confit belly, roast rack and tongue jus. Every morsel is a delicate explosion of flavour that melts in the mouth. Topped off with a smooth, creamy white chocolate and baileys brulée, it's the perfect end to a perfect day.

"Time to move," says Judy the next morning, pulling open the curtains to reveal another sunny day. A hearty breakfast later, we set off, dropping into the Lavenham Tourist Information Centre for some advice on local walks. We scoop up a few pages of step-by-step directions and stride confidently down the High Street to the immense Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul. Its cathedral-like proportions date mainly from around 1500 at the height of Lavenham's period of prosperity and it incorporates a wealth of carving in both oak and stone.

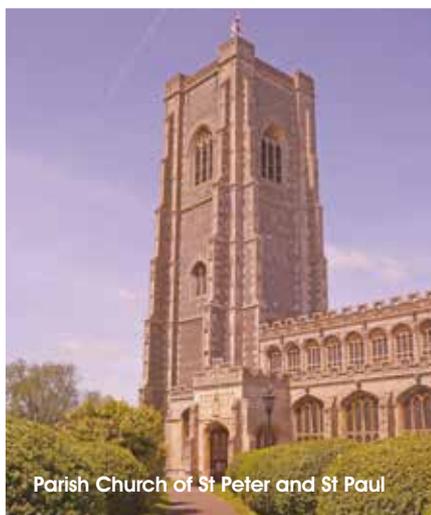
Behind the church walking paths branch out to crisscross the countryside, following old rail lines,

traversing through ancient water meadows and agricultural fields. Wildflowers spring up in haphazard patches like fairy rings and birds trill in the trees, providing the day's soundtrack. We wander happily on several of the shorter walks, the sun warming our backs as we breathe in the country-fresh air and enjoy the vistas.

Back in the village, after a late lunch, we decide we have enough time for one more stroll. We pop back in to the visitor centre for advice, hoping to find a local village we can walk to. "You could try this one, but it's new, so we don't know how good the directions are," suggests the attendant. Off we trot, over-confident in our navigational abilities.

The A to Z of directions for this walk is impressively detailed, guiding us along almost-imperceptible trails,

skirting fields where green wheat stalks ripple in the light breeze that plays across the feathery tips. We edge past the village of Preston St Mary on our travels, as we swing in a large arc back towards Lavenham. Slinking by a farmer's chicken yard, I glance through a gap in the hedge to my left and am brought up short. In a neatly mowed field, a giant rust-coloured buffalo sculpture is grazing. There's no rhyme or reason to its locale – no sign or mention in our notes – but it lends a delightfully quirky air to the perambulation.



Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul

It's at instruction U where things go somewhat awry. It's as if the track-marker was so close to home that the author stopped paying attention, leaving us floundering in the middle of a field, unsure of exactly which gap in the hedge we should be aiming for. "I've decided. This way," says Judy, heading down what looks like a goat track. I sigh and follow, a mild feeling of apprehension building as the tangled crop stretches ever-higher over our heads, becoming a veritable jungle.

When we pop out at the far edge of the field we catch a glimpse of the Lavenham Church's flag. We are nowhere near it. We fix it firmly in our sights and plow through unplowed paddocks, tiptoeing along irrigation channels and fighting through hedges to make our way back in the fading light, giggling at our ineptitude. What seems like hours later we pop out onto a road. "Wouldn't it be funny if this was where we were meant to end up?" I say, scanning the notes. Brett Farm is written in bold, matching the sign on the fence before us. "We weren't lost, we just detoured" Judy declares "...and we're just in time for dinner." ■

For more information about The Swan at Lavenham see www.theswanatlavenham.co.uk.

