

Southwold Fashioned

THE windows of what the official tourist leaflet for Southwold on the Suffolk coast describes, with undue modesty, as the "adequate range of high class shops", are filled with all manner of inviting items: root ginger and limes in Pat, the fruiterer and green-grocer's; gaily striped nightshirts and towelling beach-ropes and Panama hats in Denny & Son, the outfitter's; faded editions in Pleasures, the second-hand bookshop; and dolls' house furniture in Shoemaker's toyshop.

These must be as much a delight to the summer visitors who meander up and down the High Street, in and out of the innumerable pubs, restaurants and tea-rooms, and through the narrow sidestreets and alleyways, as the ranks of beach huts along the Promenade, the fishing boats down at the Harbour, and Jill Freud & Co's Summer Theatre in St Edmund's Hall, Cumberland Road.

"Instant Nostalgia" is the phrase that sprang to the leaflet-writer's pen when attempting to capture Southwold's essential id, and who am I to attempt to top him?

But old-fashioned charm on this scale is no accident. True, Southwold is pretty isolated. Unlike most Suffolk seaside resorts, it isn't on the way to or from anywhere. There is no passing trade to encourage those with an entrepreneurial bent to go dreaming up vulgar ways of turning a fast buck and chipping away at the gentle quality of Southwold life.

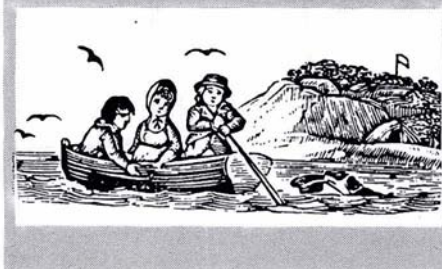
Not that they would be allowed to do so. The hideous Pier Leisure Centre, with its amusement arcade and Neptune Bar – source of the cheapest beer and the only noise, such as it is, in town – was, everybody but the local biking fraternity is agreed, a sad mistake of judgment on some long forgotten town council's part. But at least it is tucked away up at the north end of the town where few serious Southwold lovers venture, and the house prices are comparatively depressed. Any hopes that would-be developers may be harbouring of slipping anything remotely comparable through the local planners and town bigwigs are certain to be doomed.

A year or two ago, upon learning that the harbour wall was in bad shape and that millions were going to be needed to put it right, some bright spark stepped forward to say that he would be only too happy to stand the repair bill, provided he was allowed to transform the lower reaches of the town marshes into an exciting riverside development comprising residential accommodation and (dare I whisper the word?) marina.

Many another borough would doubtless have leapt at such a generous offer, but Southwold gave him short shrift. "WE ♥ SOUTHWOLD" declare posters in various windows throughout the town. "SAVE IT FROM DEVELOPERS. HELP STOP THEM!"

In the circumstances, the Spanish-style villa that is nearing completion next to the Southwold Sailing Club, just across the River Blyth from Walberswick, must be counted as much a local phenomenon as the fifteenth-century

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church of St Edmund, the six Elizabethan 18-pounder muzzle loading guns on Gun Hill, and Adnams' Southwold Bitter.

Michael Osborne of the old established estate agency firm of H.A. Adnams (some relation) admitted that it was a mystery to him. He could only assume there must have been a building there once upon a time: how else could they possibly have got planning permission?

However, the antiquated fishermen's huts are still ranged higgledy-piggledy along the shore, just as they must have been a hundred years ago – the names of the owners' boats painted above the doorways: Billy Boy and Zulu, Night Out and Florence May. Whether Victorian visitors would have strolled down across the marshes to buy fresh fish from stalls like Willie's Plaice is another matter, and I doubt there would have been the black market which exists today in the rickety wooden piers, for which cruiser-owners are apparently prepared to pay anything up to £3,000, plus £50 a year in ground rent.

Mind you, that's also the going rate for a beach hut nowadays. It seems an awful lot to shell out for the privilege of owning a few wooden square feet comprising a tiny porch with a balcony and a poky roomette with cooking facilities. Still, the names alone would probably be enough to persuade some people to dig rather deeper into their pockets than they had planned: Wee Cove and Silver Spray; Pandora's Box and Take It Easy; Simla, Seagulls, Sun Shade and Sea Horses. Plus the fact that they can be rented out for as much as £23 a week in the height of the season.

Besides, old world charm costs money these days – especially when the bulk of the people who are keen to enjoy it on a proprietary basis are either well-heeled weekenders or retirees

from the Home Counties. ("All the shops are well within toddling distance," one local remarked encouragingly.)

The place is an extraordinary jumble of big Victorian and Edwardian houses, most of which have long since been divided up into flats; a few exceedingly tasty looking Regency houses – also heavily divided – around the various Greens, which came about as a result of the Great Southwold Fire of 1659; and a generous sprinkling of Victorian fishermen's cottages of various shapes and sizes.

There is also a mish-mash of inter-war, unexpectedly suburban-looking tat and council stuff – but that is mainly restricted to the area north of the Lighthouse. "South of the Lighthouse" is where everybody wants to be and where the prices rocket dramatically. The tiniest fisherman's two-up, two-down with a yard at the back in Church Street, just off the High Street, will cost you £65-£70,000 nowadays; a three-bedder in Victoria Street up to £80,000; a twee picture-book cottage in or around the open expanses of the South Green will set you back a hundred at least; and only recently, Adnams knocked away a three-bed terraced cottage with a garage and a little garden in nearby Park Lane for £120,000.

Even a wooden shack in Ferry Road, which runs up from the harbour past the marshes, is worth paying thirty grand for, if only for the privilege of being able to pull it down and start again, and the smallest two-bed toehold, tucked away in one of the many courtyards and alleyways, with which the whole place is riddled, scores a "most desirable" rating from the agents.

Fortunately, for those keen to row themselves into this charming and expensive backwater of English seaside life, there is a surprisingly brisk turnover of property. Parents with daughters at St Felix or sons at Framlingham, who once bought a little something in order to be on hand for exeat weekends, suddenly discover that the educational caravanserai has moved on; children grow out of bucket and spade holidays and contemptuous of notices warning them that "It is dangerous to climb on the groynes", and yearn for more challenging distractions; speculative purchasers find they no longer need the rent money that Adnams rake in for them during July and August; the sailors get bored with the tricky river mouth and sea sailing and dream of more absorbing topography... Who knows why people leave?

To those who can afford to stomp up the sort of money it takes to step into their shoes, it will doubtless be an unfathomable mystery that anybody could bear to say goodbye to a place that can offer such multifarious delights as tutored wine evenings at The Crown; a Sailor's Reading Room; Ayckbourn and Shaw nightly at 8.15; a mayor's chair, desk and gavel made of bog oak from the ancient submerged forest of Easton Bavents; cottages with names like The Bolt-Hole and The Tittle Mouse House; and Prof Welsh's Punch and Judy show – "Every fine day, 11.30 and 3. On the beach below Gun Hill."