

EAST COAST TONIC



"Sailing boats lie on the shores of the creek"—Blakeney.

A DAYFUL OF MILES—AND OF SEA AND SUNSHINE

by MICHAEL BROWN

ANYONE suffering from traffic cramp should follow this East Anglian route for a cure. After a dozen miles of straight highways, little and sensible traffic, you forget the metropolitan maelstrom, the gear box, and red, amber and green. A great lift of the spirits takes place, and only a sense of misapplied gentility prevents your (tuneful) hum from becoming a bathroom bellow.

A few figures will show what I mean. The car was a 1½-litre M.G., the owner of which would not "cane it" if you paid him. Yet from East Berkshire to Fakenham, in Norfolk, the average speed was 40.8 m.p.h.—and until the Barnet by-pass (A555) is reached, the route is north orbital and very much influenced by London. From the A555 junction to Fakenham the M.G. showed 42.3 m.p.h. and when it sensibly turned east at Baldock, it covered the 41¼ miles (R.A.C. Handbook) to Barton Mills at an average speed of 55; hand on heart, I can vouch that the speedometer needle did not go above 65 m.p.h.; that the speedometer, recently checked, is quite fast at this point, and that there was less strain to the driver in those miles than there

was during the 30 m.p.h. limit circuit through Watford and Rickmansworth.

Total mileage during the day exceeded 400, yet we arrived home with a sensation of elation and an absence of tiredness that puts East Anglia on top of even the run to Scotland as a mile-eater. But what is there to go for, you ask? The answer is sunshine, pines, Blakeney Point, vipers bugloss and East Dereham. Others might reply Norwich, King's Lynn and Sandringham, with Newmarket Heath in the early morning; the answer, in fact, is capable of infinite variation.

These roads—the East Anglian As—have the old Roman directness of purpose. Many times they vanish on the horizon, often without a single car between you and vanishing point. Such junctions as exist are clear, with visibility going a quarter-mile either way, and surface is irreproachable. Your right foot takes up a position of permanency with the needle where you want it; the engine sings, the tyres tear their calico out there on the tarmac, and all's right with England. All's right with your fellow-men, too.



Main street parking at East Dereham.



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This spot is full of an immense but friendly loneliness, if such a contradiction can be permitted. I saw Blakeney under a hot sun; with an easterly gale and the sting of spindrift in the air the mood might well be different, and it is a place of moods. This is one of the National Trust's most interesting properties, and they show a rare imagination in acquiring such areas. A companion is Wicken Fen, quite close in East Anglian terms.

After a picnic lunch on the dunes we followed A149 along the coast. At Cley-next-the-Sea the Fisherman's Arms presents the traditional county style of building, with cobble and brick, in a perfect study pattern; the end of the building is unwashed, the front cream-washed, and the straggle of roofs down the curve of the village street is delightful.

Not until you near Cromer is the sea really close again, but just before Sheringham it can be viewed through a wood on the hillside with a Mediterranean effect. But there were no schooners with a cargo of Tunisian dates to grace the blue, only a "flat-iron" from the London gas-works plodding up to Tyneside. The sound of practice gunfire recalled other experiences in E-boat Alley, but the ocean today was serene.

East Angles' Royalty

Both Sheringham and Cromer are attractive, the latter decidedly so. A good seafront has its complement in the narrow streets of the town, and when you think of East Anglia's weather record it goes down on the list of possibles for a summer stay. But for guidebook interest you should go to Dereham, or East Dereham, towards which the M.G. turned through Aylsham and Reepham. The countryside here is "close" in the farming sense, smaller fields, tree-dotted, and hedges, replacing the wide Suffolk and Cambridgeshire sweeps farther west.

Parking space is ample in the main street of the town, to the west of which is the detached bell tower of the Perpendicular church. The date is 1367. Round in the churchyard is the tomb of St. Withburga,

"youngest daughter of Annas, King of the East Angles, who died A.D. 654. The Abbot and Monks of Ely Cathedral stole this Precious Relique and translated it to Ely Cathedral, where it was interred near her three Royal Sisters."

Hard by are Bonner's Cottages, quaint, well-thatched, and bearing the date MDII. Above the doors and windows, and plainly visible in the photograph, is an unusual example of pargetting, for it is coloured. This work is peculiar to Suffolk and Essex, although odd examples such as this occur on the fringes of adjoining counties; most of the surviving work is found in Suffolk, however. In the recollection of an expert who gave me this information, a fine example at Prittlewell, Essex, was also treated with



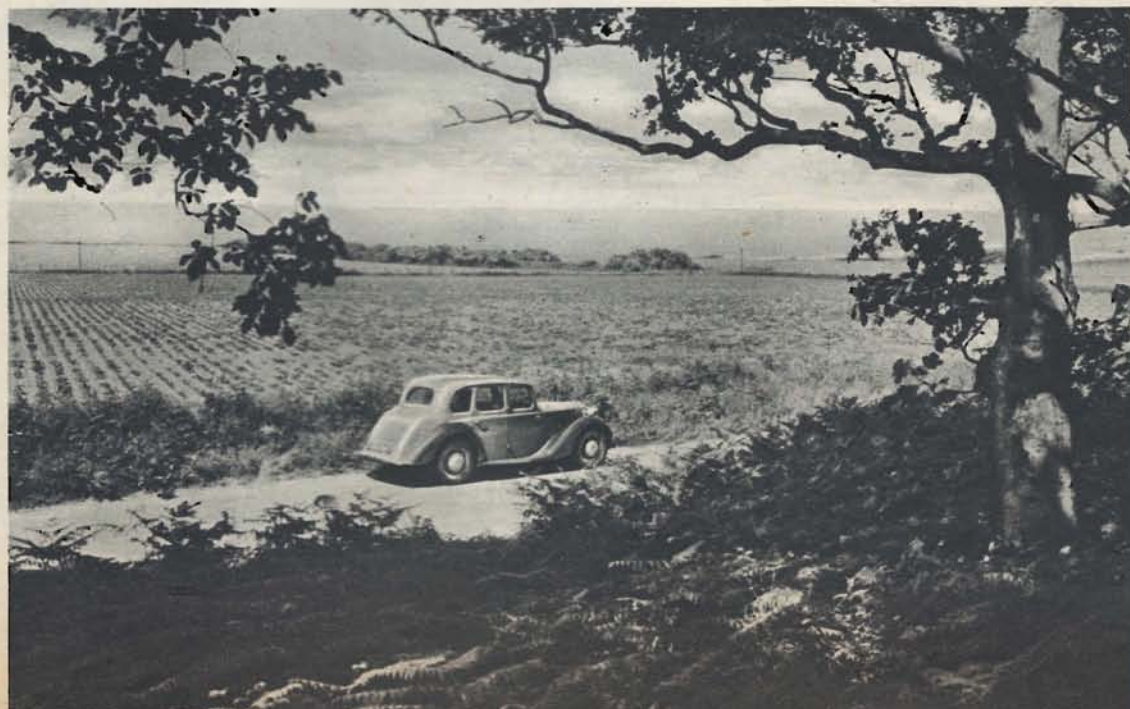
"Look back at Blakeney, a great church tower and a few roofs now far distant."

colour. Pargetting is discussed in Basil Oliver's *Old Houses in East Anglia*, also Bankart's *Plasterwork*, and in works by Lethaby and Lawrence Turner. The best-known examples are Crown House, Newport, Essex; Sparrow's House, Ipswich; and a house at Clare, Suffolk. It is often, says my informant regretfully, wantonly destroyed.

The occupant sat on the cool doorstep, for the front of the cottage is on the shady side at 6 p.m. "Good day," he remarked, at the sight of the camera. I returned his greeting and opined that it was fine weather, to which he agreed, thereupon resuming his contemplation of the tranquil street. He has probably posed for his photograph many times; anyway, he has hit on the secret of the good result. He takes no notice of the camera, and the result is splendid. It is the self-conscious model who spoils the print.

Temperature and sun were declining, but only by a few degrees. At this time of the year one must be really late to need the head lamps. The roof stayed open, and the driver's jacket remained on the back seat. Both front windows were down. At 10.30 p.m. the ventilatory *status quo* had been preserved, and as I put the car away I needed the head lamps merely to see if the garage wall was in the same place. I peered at the trip, somewhat surprised to see it over the 400 mark. As circumstances were, I might have been driving to Glasgow the next day instead of to Norfolk on the day which I have just described. I am sure that the 400 miles to Glasgow would have seemed much farther, although north of the Border there is a hint of East Anglian spaciousness in the mountain air. Ah, yes, but the mountains insist that it can be only a hint. For the real thing you must go to Blakeney Point.

"Viewed through a wood . . . with a Mediterranean effect"—the North Sea near Sheringham.





EAST COAST TONIC . . . continued

East Anglian drivers seem to be conditioned to higher speeds than their compatriots elsewhere; there is a swish as you meet at 120 m.p.h., but driver B has not deviated an inch from his line, and proudly you have emulated him. A Lagonda overtook us along Six Mile Bottom into Newmarket, travelling, I should say, at 75 m.p.h. We followed a Jaguar in the evening from Thetford to Baldock at a cruising speed well above normal. Yet it seemed the most normal procedure. What motoring it is!

Just where such a tour begins is difficult to say, but I think at Baldock, for the Great North Road is a "service" road to this route. To Newmarket the highway (A505 and 11) plunges up and down over the long gradients, with great distances visible on all sides, and humanity sparse and busy. A tractor sends up a syncopated plume of exhaust as its driver opens and shuts the throttle; three tiny figures are etched against the sky atop a hayrick (incidentally a disappearing feature of the English landscape); where still more space exists—upwards—an aircraft defies the winds of heaven and remains within sight for a long time. It is a landscape of distance, from which the enchantment stems.

In the heathland area the Forestry Commission is busy and the effect is as yet outlandish. Nicely so, however, and we shall get used to our forests. But the roadsides in July are a picture, for in Norfolk grows in profusion that most admirable of wild flowers, the vipers bugloss, and its blue spikes are interspersed with the pink of the common mallow. "I *must* have some of those," said my passenger, "and for once you *must* stop before the last has disappeared." So we stopped, and a great bowlful of vipers bugloss, mallow and wild mignonette graced our table for many days after, to remind us of colourful miles.

Our objective was Blakeney Point, the National Trust bird sanctuary at the northern tip of Norfolk. After Fakenham the road meanders, with Blakeney adequately signed, and at a certain rise in the road you feel convinced that the land's end is near, for the sky has an extra hard brilliance as the light is tossed back at it from the sea. "We shall see the sea over that rise," I said; and my

passenger nodded. The M.G. climbed up, and sure enough the land on the other side gave place to sand dunes and shore, while away beyond, the North Sea was blue as only a clear sky could make it.

Now the space has really caught up with you. A tiny atom, your car drifts down to Blakeney on the shore, crosses the coast road (A149) and pulls up on the quay. There is ample parking space; the National Trust sign is on your right, sailing boats lie on the shores of the creek, and the path out to the point sets off along the top of a grey-green dyke. For to reach the point you must walk.

I would not wish to do otherwise, for such places as Blakeney Point have a unique appeal. With the wrong temperament, it could be "just a stretch of shoreline." For the discerning it is a scene of great delicacy, for between the blue of the distant sea and the green of the coarse grass whispering all about you are tideflats, pools, mud, sand, and coastal vegetation; and, of course, the birds. At such a combination the water-colourist's eyes would light up, for it spells colour—fugitive, ethereal colour, so slight that the brush is loaded almost entirely with water and the paper must be white for it to be truly rendered. But the combination is exquisite.

Splatter-dash Colours

There are stronger tints. The sea-lavender is notably blue, and the heads of the sea pinks, which the gardener grows as thrift, scatter pink beads in your path. Dark stems and succulent leaves indicate the shrubby sea-blite, which grows only between the Wash and the Thames, and ranks, therefore, as Something to See. Sit quietly in the grass and the birds are all around you. Flocks of starlings wheel and turn against the blue; seabirds cry as they come slithering down on the mud in search of food, and the larks fill even this great auditorium with song. There are, of course, great rarities for the ornithologist to sight at Blakeney, but, alas, I am no bird expert. Look back at Blakeney, a great church tower and a few roofs, now far distant.

"Hard by are Bonner's Cottages."

"The Fisherman's Arms presents the traditional county style"—Cley-next-the-Sea.

