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Trail

Second site

Discover why Norwich was once
England's second-largest city

Time: 1½ hours

Distance: 2 miles

Landscape: urban

England's biggest city is London but where comes next? Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool all have strong claims. For over 500 years though the answer was... Norwich.

Today Norwich is often portrayed as a backwater. Without a motorway and within a National Park it can seem quiet, remote, pretty but provincial. Yet from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution, Norwich was a thriving powerhouse famed throughout Europe.

This short walk visits some of Norwich's most attractive sights to explore why the capital of East Anglia was once England's 'second city'.

Location:

Norwich, Norfolk

Start:

Norwich Cathedral, The Close, NR1 4DH

Finish:

The Guildhall, Guildhall Hill, NR2 1JS

Grid reference:

TG 23396 08860

Be prepared:

Some uphill sections and old cobbled roads without pavements

Keep an eye out for:

A local saying claims Norwich has "a pub for every day of the year and a church for every Sunday" – see how many you can spot!

Directions



Start by entering the Cathedral grounds through either the Erpingham or Ethelbert Gate. You will enter a rectangular lawn called the Close. Look on the lawn for a statue of Lord Nelson near the Cathedral spire. Stop by this statue and look towards the Cathedral.



Route and stopping points



- 01 Norwich Cathedral
- 02 Pull's Ferry, Ferry Lane
- 03 Cow Tower, St James Meadow
- 04 St James Mill, Whitefriars Bridge
- 05 The Quayside from Eye Bridge
- 06 The Britons Arms, Elm Hill
- 07 The Strangers' Hall, Charing Cross
- 08 Norwich Guildhall, Guildhall Hill

01 Norwich Cathedral, Upper Close next to Lord Nelson statue

We begin walking around Norwich at one of the traditional markers of being a city - having a cathedral. Norwich Cathedral is the largest building in East Anglia. Begun in 1096 it's also one of the oldest and gives an insight into Norwich's origins.

People have lived in this part of Norfolk for at least 5,000 years. In 60 AD there was a Roman town at nearby Caistor St Edmund but Norwich itself emerged 700 years later from a Saxon settlement called 'Norvic'. By the tenth century Norvic was a large market town home to around 6,000 people.

The city we can see today developed after the Norman invasion of 1066. It was the Normans who built the Cathedral and nearby Castle. Made in specially-imported pale French limestone, both buildings were imposing symbols of Norman supremacy.

The cathedral is symbolic in other ways too. Look up at the tower and spire. Church spires represent holiness by literally reaching towards heaven. Norwich Cathedral pierces the air to 96 metres (315 feet). Only Salisbury Cathedral is taller (at 123 metres / 404 feet).

It's tempting to think that Norwich has the second-tallest cathedral because it was once England's second-largest city. There is still a widespread belief that cathedrals give places city status. Norwich, like Liverpool, even has two cathedrals - but there are several cities without one. There are also around a dozen cathedrals not in a city. So what's the connection?

Historically, towns were considered cities if they had a 'diocesan' cathedral. Dioceses are the Church's administrative regions. Cathedral cities became official in the 1540s, when King Henry VIII reorganised the Church during the Reformation. Henry created six new dioceses and formally awarded their cathedral towns with city status.

By that time, Norwich had held city status for over 140 years. The capital of East Anglia was wealthy and influential, with extensive European trade links. Let's find out why and trace the sources of its success...

Directions

Keep the Cathedral on your left and walk towards the other statue on the lawn (the Duke of Wellington). Pass this statue then turn left to join a road sloping gently downhill. With the Cathedral still on your left, pass the Chapter Office and follow the road ahead. Take care for traffic along the way. After a set of playing fields, stop in front of a stone building with a wide arch in it.

02 Pull's Ferry, Ferry Lane

This curious house is called Pull's Ferry. Look through the arch and we can see where the name comes from. The spot marks an historic crossing point over the River Wensum beyond. An information board beside the road outlines the building's story.

Did you notice how straight this road to Pull's Ferry was? We've walked the route of an old canal. The Normans cut it while building the Cathedral, to carry the limestone as far as possible. The stone arrived by boat all the way from Caen in northern France. But how, when Norwich is 20 miles inland from the coast? To find out, go through the arch of Pull's Ferry and look at the river.

For centuries, Norwich was largely isolated from the rest of England by the Norfolk Broads. The Broads are a vast expanse of marshy fenland, veined with rivers and streams. Before railways developed, it was quicker to reach Norwich by boat from Amsterdam than by road from London!

Cue the River Wensum. This willow-lined waterway emerges 25 miles northwest of Norwich between three

small villages. Three miles after enfolding the east of the city, it joins another river - the Yare. The Yare flows east through the Broads for 35 miles then enters the North Sea at Great Yarmouth.

Norfolk-raised writer and broadcaster Nicholas Crane suggests, "Nowhere in England were two trading centres of such importance so close together". From Great Yarmouth, boats could navigate by tidal river all the way into Norwich. Direct access to the sea allowed Norwich to trade goods with Europe, especially the Low Countries (today's Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark).

European trade made Norwich immensely wealthy and still shapes the city's character today. We'll explore how a little later. For now, notice how quiet the Wensum is. Small pleasure boats waft along its gentle meanders, while walkers and cyclists enjoy the paths. It may seem unlikely that this was a busy working river. But a clue remains in Norwich's name. 'Norvic' was Saxon for 'north port'.

Directions

Go back through the arch. With Pull's Ferry behind you, turn right and follow the path through a gate. Continue along the path with the river on your right. The path sometimes leaves the riverside and there are a few more gates to go through. These are left open in daylight hours.

When you reach a stone bridge (Bishop's Bridge), continue ahead towards The Red Lion pub. Keep the pub on your right and follow the path past the car park. The path becomes lined with trees then curves left. Stop when you reach a brick tower beside the river.

03 Cow Tower, St James Meadow

The River Wensum opened Norwich up to trade but also threats from less friendly visitors. In the 820s eastern England was raided - and ruled - several times by Danish Vikings. A visit from "King Sweyn Forkbeard" in 1004 left Norwich "completely burned and ravaged".

As Norwich became increasingly important in the Middle Ages, defences were built to stop another sacking. This is the Cow Tower, a former tollbooth converted into military use. Originally built in the 1240s it's one of the oldest defence towers in the country.

Notice we are by a sharp bend in the river. The tower's strategic site allowed soldiers inside to spot potential enemies from a greater distance. Peer through the slit windows. These concealed hand-held weapons like crossbows and guns.

The Wensum only protected one side of the town though. Since Norman times, Norwich had expanded west from the river. So from 1294 a huge flint wall was built around the town. Some 2½ miles long, it took about 40 years to complete and used enough stone to build 80 churches.

When it was finished Norwich became the biggest walled town in England, with a greater land area than London. To boost the wall's integrity, a law banned any new buildings outside of it. Norwich's remote location was restricted even further.

Yet as Norwich's status increased, so did the population. As more people moved in, especially for work, the town became increasingly crowded. The city centre still has a dense labyrinth of narrow lanes and alleys. We'll see some of these later.

Meanwhile, only small sections remain of the wall. From the 1790s it was gradually dismantled to allow the city to expand. The Cow Tower is now a rare survivor of Norwich's historic defences. We'll soon discover what made Norwich so worth protecting.

Directions

Continue following the path with the river on your right. Pass a modern curving bridge (Jarrols Bridge) where shortly afterwards the river bends to the left. Look across the river here for the remains of another defence tower. A little further, you'll be opposite a large redbrick building by a line of willow trees. Continue along the path and take the steps or ramp onto a stone bridge. Stop halfway across it and look back at the large building.

04 View of St James Mill, Whitefriars Bridge

Besides connecting and protecting Norwich, the Wensum's water fuelled many types of work, including brewing, printing, and shoemaking. The river's major use though was in textiles. From here on Whitefriars Bridge we can see a six-storey mill, St James Mill.

From the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries Norwich was at the centre of British wool making. The city became famous for 'worsted' woollen cloth. Wool was washed in the Wensum and woven on looms into a fine yarn. It was then softened with local clay to make it more wearable.

Clay soils are 'impermeable', which means they retain water. Norfolk's mostly flat, clay fields made lush sheep and cattle pasture, and a series of county-wide 'drover's roads' spread for moving livestock. Several passed through Norwich, which helped it develop into a large market town.

Visiting Norwich in 1698 traveller Celia Fiennes found "a rich, thriving industrious place full of weaving, knitting and dyeing". Norwich textiles peaked in the 1720s when the city had 12,000 looms and around 70,000 people were employed in wool work. Built a century later, St James Mill is an industry landmark. But does it seem out of place?

Large industrial buildings like this are rare in East Anglia. When the mill opened in 1839, Norwich's 'woolly mammoth' faced extinction. From the 1790s the Napoleonic Wars had reduced the city's European trade. Other threats came from industrialising England - especially the North West's new mill towns.

The North West's Atlantic-facing ports were ideal for trading with America. Imports of American cotton soon superseded home-spun wool. The Atlantic also brought lots of rain, swept from the coast and drained off the Pennine Hills. This deluge gave the region's mills a constant power supply.

Norwich meanwhile is much drier, with below-average rainfall levels. Water wasn't the only shortage. Early industry relied upon coal. Coal powered everything, from furnaces and steam engines to household kitchens. And while areas like the North West had rich natural coal seams, Norfolk had none.

St James Mill was an impressive attempt to sustain Norwich's textiles. The city had been overtaken though and lost its monopoly. In 1901 St James Mill became a chocolate factory and is now used for offices. Today it reflects how England's second-largest city unravelled.

Directions

With the Mill behind you, turn left. Continue to the end of the bridge then cross the road - take care as traffic moves quickly here. Re-join the riverside path with the Wensum on your right. Follow the path up to the next bridge (Fye Bridge). Go onto the bridge and stop in the middle.

05 View of the Quayside from Fye Bridge

Pause here and look back along the river. Below us is the Quayside. A row of colourful houses lines the water, with the Cathedral beyond completing a picture-postcard scene.

Now imagine the river crammed with barges. And the road packed with workers and horses, carts and trucks, piles of goods stacked on the cobbles...The Quayside was where boats loaded and unloaded their cargo on the way to or from the North Sea. While Norwich's main export was wool, imports included Chinese tea, American tobacco, and rum and sugar from the West Indies. Other loads travelled less far, such as Newcastle coal and fish from the Norfolk coast.

Another import is still visible today. Look carefully at the house roofs. Many are made from curved red 'pantiles'. A common sight in eastern England, pantiles originate from the Netherlands. They arrived as ballast in Dutch ships, which stocked up with English wool then left the tiles behind.

Did you also spot the bale-shaped sculptures lining the Quayside wall? They feature the names of people and companies that worked here during the last 200 years. The Quayside was busy until the Wensum lost its commercial traffic to railways and large coastal ports.

Before we continue, take in this bridge. The current Fye Bridge dates from the 1930s but there was one here at least 800 years earlier. Its name highlights how Norwich had at least 'fye' (five) bridges over the Wensum by the 1300s - more than London had over the Thames.

By contrast, there were no bridges at all between Norwich and Great Yarmouth. This highlights another of Norwich's natural advantages. The city's low-lying location was the first suitable river crossing from the sea. Norwich's historic bridges are not just signs of prestige. They are also a reminder of why people first settled here.

Directions

With your back to the Quayside, carefully cross the road and turn left to the end of Fye Bridge. Just before a church, turn right into the bottom of Elm Hill. As you go up Elm Hill, take your time to browse the street (though watch your footing on the cobbles!). Stop towards the top of the hill by the large tree on the left. There is a bench around the trunk where you can have a rest.

06 Bench outside The Britons Arms, Elm Hill

Elm Hill is Norwich's most famous street. From up here near the top we can see why. The cobbled road lined with tumbling timber-framed buildings is very pretty. This street also offers a glimpse of what England's 'second city' would have looked like. But look closely - there is more to the scenery.

First, look downhill at the left side of the street. It isn't obvious but these buildings back onto the Wensum. During Norwich's 'second city' peak residents included merchants and traders. While their houses faced the street, behind were workshops and stores. Many had quays directly onto the river.

Elm Hill was also a major road between the river and town centre. Remember the goods we heard about at the Quayside? Many were carried in or out of Norwich along this street. This scenic spot was another bustling commercial thoroughfare.

The earliest accounts of Elm Hill date from around 1200 but almost everything we can see is Tudor or later. In 1507 central Norwich suffered a terrible fire. Hundreds of wooden and thatched buildings were destroyed, including here. Looking uphill, The Britons Arms (on the left beyond the bench) was one of the few survivors.

Other disasters followed. The street is named after a group of elms that were planted nearby. In the 1970s they were killed by Dutch Elm Disease and replaced with plane trees. Fifty years earlier, the street itself had barely survived. As the Wensum's trade declined, so did parts of Norwich's riverside. By the 1920s Elm Hill was a slum earmarked for demolition.

Saved by campaigners, the street has come full circle in Norwich's economy. Today, Elm Hill is in high demand for television, film, and photography shoots. The street's changing fortunes reflect those of a city where heritage has become a major asset. Norwich is marketed as the 'City of Stories' and at the next stop we'll meet some major characters.

Directions

Continue up Elm Hill as it bears left around The Britons Arms. At the top turn sharp right and follow the road downhill towards The Halls. Turn your back on The Halls and use the zebra crossing outside of them to go ahead into St Andrews Hill.

Take the first right and pass by the church. Then turn left and pass the entrance to the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell. At the next junction turn right and continue along cobbled Bedford Street. Pass the Jarrolds store on the left and carefully cross over Exchange Street to enter Lobster Lane.

When you reach another church on the right (St John, Maddermarket) turn right and follow the alley underneath the tower. Pass the Maddermarket Theatre then turn left at the end. After a short distance, stop outside The Strangers' Hall Museum.

07 The Strangers' Hall, Charing Cross

We are now in the Norwich Lanes. These winding streets are some of Norwich's oldest and still follow a medieval layout. The Strangers' Hall nestled among them is now a museum. Originally a house owned by a series of important merchants, the building is full of clues to the people who shaped the city.

First is the name. The 'Strangers' were migrants from the Low Countries who settled in Norwich to escape religious oppression. In sixteenth century Europe, Protestants became persecuted for their beliefs and many left their homelands for asylum elsewhere.

Norwich's location and established trade links were especially attractive. The city's authorities also realised that new people could bring new skills. So in 1565 they invited a group of Protestants from the Netherlands to move into this building. Soon a third of Norwich's population were Dutch, Flemish, Belgian Walloons and French Huguenots.

The Strangers' Hall reveals how they made a living. Notice, like other surrounding buildings, it has large downstairs windows. These allowed plenty of light inside for weaving on looms. With these new techniques, the Strangers helped to strengthen Norwich's textiles industry.

Also look for red-painted posts in the nearby lanes. They mark the boundaries of the Strangers' former community and celebrate Norwich's textiles heritage. By the time the Strangers arrived, Norwich was famous for 'madder ware'. These were bright red clothes, made from the crushed roots of madder plants and sold nearby at a 'madder market'.

Norwich's signature colour though is yellow. The city's famous yellow goods range from mustard to sports cars. It's fitting that this building is painted yellow too, as the Strangers helped to popularise the colour. It's thanks to the Strangers that Norwich City football club wear yellow kit and are nicknamed 'the Canaries'.

Canaries originate from the Canary Islands off northwest Africa (including Tenerife and Lanzarote). Explorers introduced them into Europe, where they became popular pets. Some of the European weavers brought their canaries with them to Norwich – and canary breeding became another city industry.

Directions

With the Strangers' Hall on your left continue to a set of red bollards. Turn left and go into the uphill lane past St Gregory's church. Leave the churchyard by taking the diagonal path to the left with a boat-shaped artwork set in the ground.

Bear left past The Strangers Coffee House and continue into Lower Goat Lane, another narrow uphill street. At the top you will emerge opposite the City Hall clock tower. Turn left again and head towards the Guildhall, the smaller dark building that looks a bit like another church. Stop by the series of bicycle racks facing the Guildhall's chequered end wall.

08 Norwich Guildhall, Guildhall Hill

We finish at Norwich's commercial heart, the market place. Founded in the 1070s, Norwich Market is thought to be the oldest in England. Its sea of striped roofs is another legacy of the Normans. Look on the left horizon - there's their Castle keeping watch over the stalls below.

Besides the Castle, other surrounding buildings offer a potted history of Norwich. Straight ahead is its finest medieval church, St Peter Mancroft, while to our right is the City Hall. Literally overshadowed by the City Hall, the building next to us may seem unimportant. But it's arguably the key one here.

This is the Guildhall. Guilds were societies for skilled workers, and were the forerunners of councils and trade unions. When the Guildhall was completed in 1424 there were around 130 recorded trades in Norwich. The building is still England's largest Guildhall outside London and reflects an important chapter in the 'City of Stories'.

As Norwich grew (in size and wealth) from trading wool, King Henry IV granted the town a 'charter of incorporation' in 1404. The charter made Norwich one of Britain's first official cities. City status allowed various freedoms, including collecting taxes, electing a mayor and holding law courts. The Guildhall was built to host and celebrate these new duties.

Notice the chequered end wall. Black and white squares are a traditional symbol of tax collectors. The title Chancellor of the Exchequer stems from Treasury taxes being collected on a chequered table. In an era when many couldn't read - and in Norwich's case some residents didn't speak English - this wall explained the building's purpose.

Over the centuries, the Guildhall had many other uses. Council sessions were held here until the City Hall opened in 1938. Today's bicycle racks stand where criminals were held in stocks, while the room which now houses the café was once a prison! The Guildhall also stored the city's fire engine.

Dwarfed by later development and now a proud historic building, it's tempting to see the Guildhall as Norwich in microcosm. Today it both reveals the city's origins and reflects Norwich's current status. Or does it? It's ironic that Norwich is sometimes seen as inward and old-fashioned when it developed from overseas trade and innovation.

Norwich is still expansive today. Norwich was the UK's first UNESCO City of Literature, awarded for printing England's first local newspaper, opening the first public library and running the first Creative Writing university degree course. The city is also home to Britain's original pedestrianised shopping street, some of the earliest cash machines, and Britain's first city-wide free Wi-Fi. England's historic 'second city' is still creating firsts.

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**