

## FEATURE

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# Shopping for secret of Holt

Shoppers who halt in Holt can expect a retail experience with a difference – largely chain-free, the cobweb of streets and alleyways that fan out from the High Street boast a vast number of independent shops.

A Georgian town boasting some of Norfolk's most prestigious postcodes, Holt has recently been praised by English Heritage as a traditional town which has risen to the challenge of meeting the needs of modern shoppers.

While other towns have suffered with tumbledown-strewn High Streets that act as a magnet for Mary Portas, Holt remains a thriving retail centre rather than a relic from the past.

From hidden yards packed with antique centres and independent shops to the high street and the 'Harrods of Norfolk' Bakers and Larners – Holt is a box of delights for even the most discerning of shoppers.

And what discerning shoppers they are: in April, the Duchess of Cambridge, Catherine Middleton, was spotted in Holt's High Street and enjoyed a private visit at the Mews Antique Emporium with a group of friends.

English Heritage recently singled out one of Norfolk's most picturesque market towns as a top British example of a historic area successfully adapting to the changing world of retail.

**STACIA BRIGGS** took a trip to Holt to discover its recipe for success.

A report from English Heritage, which also praised Chapelfield shopping centre in Norwich, said that other towns should learn lessons from one of the gems in North Norfolk's crown.

"Holt has an unusually diverse independent retail offer which has developed partly from Gresham's presence in the town and partly as a result of innovative entrepreneurial activity that has seen local businesses grow regional reputations and spread their activities," it said.

"The cross-fertilisation of businesses and cultural activities has played a key role in creating a distinctive and innovative offer which punches above its weight in the retail hierarchy."

The findings were published in a ranch of new research carried out

by the heritage watchdog into the latest retail and property trends and their implications for historic town centres in the future.

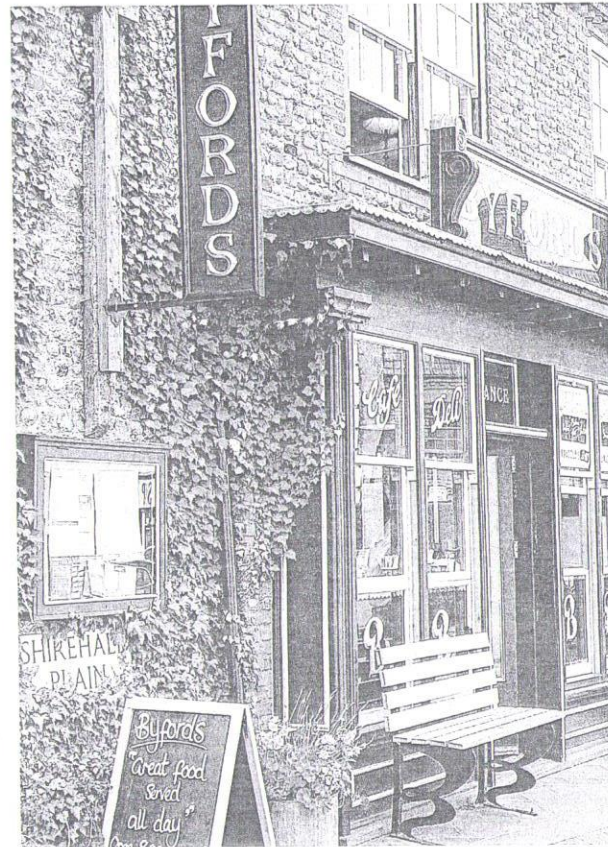
For first-time visitors, Holt is deceptively large: easy to dismiss as no more than a line of pastel-coloured buildings forming a High Street, the town has a network of alleys and courtyards which house high-end galleries, jewellers, antique emporiums and gift shops.

There's Appleyard, Chapelyard and Lees Yard, all packed with independent shops, many of which showcase arts and crafts made here in Norfolk, but it's not just chic accessories and nick-nacks that are on offer; Holt also caters for its population with a wide range of shops selling fresh fish from the North Norfolk coast, fruit and vegetables sourced locally and baked goods made in the town.

English Heritage gave a special mention to the conversion of Byfords in Holt, which it says has helped bring visitors to the Georgian town with its café and boutique-style bed and breakfast accommodation.

Owners Iain and Clair Wilson took over the café in 2000 and have invested more than £3 million converting the grade two-listed building – believed to be the oldest house in Holt – into an award-winning, 16-bedroom "posh B&B", self-contained holiday flat, café and restaurant, delicatessen, a pizza takeaway service and outside catering business.

"Every successful town needs some key cornerstones to make it successful: Gresham's is Holt's first



■ Above and below, Byfords shop and cafe, Holt. Top right, Holt High Street.

one – it employs a large number of people, pulls around 1,000 children and teenagers to the town and their respective parents," said Mr Wilson.

"As Gresham's is a private school the demographic is fairly affluent, hence the boutique and higher-end shops. The second is Bakers and Larners, which is a real institution and works really hard on marketing itself to the area around Holt, pulling people into the town.

"I guess we have also become a destination that pulls people in, but other areas like Appleyard all contribute to the great experience that Holt offers. The mix of independent shops and quality makes the whole experience special."

Mr Wilson said that he particularly liked the shops in Holt that provide a consistently high

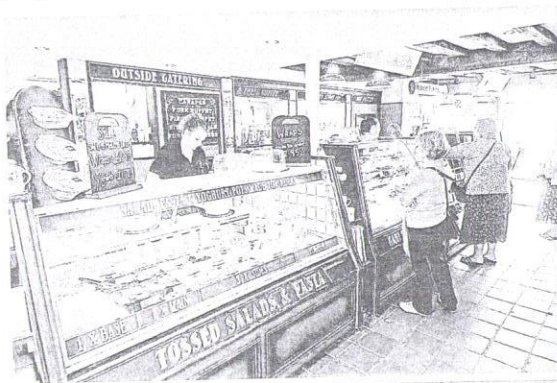
standard, such as Benbows and Crowes, P&S Butchers, the North Norfolk Fish Company and service providers such as hairdressers, dentists and shoe repairers.

But he said the town did face challenges from the internet and a lack of parking.

"The massive shift to shopping online has hit the High Street. Maybe as we move forward, towns like Holt will survive thanks to the service industry and the things that just can't be done online," he said.

"It is also a travesty that the success of Holt can't be backed with an effective plan from the local council with regards to parking and access. The town is often gridlocked and it takes a person with strong values to continue shopping with independents when you have to drive round the town for 15 minutes to find a space.

"If Holt is to continue to succeed and survive the next decade, the



The Old Town