

Buy a home in Suffolk, Benjamin Britten's picturesque backyard

Suffolk retains the English spirit so perfectly captured by the British composer Benjamin Britten and its old-fashioned charm is irresistible, says Clive Aslet.

Charm: Southwold pier is one of many of Suffolk's highlights Photo: Alamy

By Clive Aslet

12:00PM BST 08 Jul 2013

There are few composers so identified with their home turf as Benjamin Britten. A century ago, on the feast day of St Cecilia, patron saint of music, he was born at Lowestoft, the son of a dentist. The family house looked out to sea. After attending Gresham's School in Norfolk, where he composed furiously and could often be found, to the surprise of other pupils, reading musical scores in bed, he spent a desultory few years at the Royal College of Music in London; and his war years were, to the consternation of some of his British audiences, spent in the United States.

But once back in this country, he returned to East Anglia, founding the Aldeburgh Festival, converting Snape Maltings to a concert hall and making a home at The Red House in Aldeburgh with the tenor Peter Pears. From Peter Grimes to *The Little Sweep*, a children's opera based on the Earl of Cranbrook's family at Great Glemham House in Suffolk, his oeuvre is pervaded by a sense of place. As he said himself: "My music has its roots in where I live and work."

Britten died in 1976. Thirty-seven years on, the Heritage Coast is, as its name implies, perfectly preserved – although the composer would have been surprised by the surge of wealth that has overtaken it like a neap tide, pushing the price of seaside homes to more than £2 million in the boom years.

I first visited 40 years ago, staying in a friend's fisherman's cottage; his mother was an artist. People came here for golf and old-fashioned sailing (nothing motorised, please); bracing outdoor activity, with extra pullovers when the wind blew in from Russia, was the note.

There's still a memory of this world. Aldeburgh must be one of the few places in Britain where the cinema doubles as an art gallery. At Orford, the Butley Oysterage, serving a menu of smoked fish, has barely changed – and yet the new Suffolk can be seen across the little square in an award-winning bakery whose sourdough is an essential purchase. (The Oysterage, incidentally, features on a kneeler in the church of St Bartholomew, a wonderful building where Britten gave the first performances of *Curlew River*, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *Noye's Fludde*.)

Generally, the county has gone upmarket. Families buy here to provide their offspring with the sort of old-fashioned childhood that only the well-heeled middle classes can afford. Children wear the well-made, retro-ish clothes you don't find in Primark. Southwold, home of Adnams brewery, has a pier, but not of the gaudy kind you'll find at other holiday resorts. It's painted white, and the shops appear to sell nothing that isn't jauntily striped.

This is beach hut territory. The wooden frames break out into rainbow colours at Southwold. Walberswick, which looks with suspicion at its more bustling neighbour from across the mudflats of the River Blyth, paints hers black: Suffolk has always harboured a tradition of puritanism and dissent. The prices are by no means so austere, though. One of the Walberswick huts was up for sale by tender earlier this year, with a guide price of £50,000; the agent, Durrants, even printed a brochure. This is the Suffolk Riviera, after all, where a

three-bedroom cottage at Southwold is on the market with Halford Wetmore (01502 723007) for £550,000. At Orford, Jackson-Stops & Staff (01473 218218) is asking £1.85 million for Shellpits, a Fifties house with panoramic views, made over by a local architect with grey matchboarding.

Not all of Suffolk is so fancy. There are pinewoods here, and shrines that sell honey, eggs and vegetables, with an honesty box for the coins. You pass concrete pillboxes put up in case the Germans invaded by way of the Minsmere bird reserve; the bank of shingle, Orford Ness, became a secret testing station for the Ministry of Defence, whose strangely shaped laboratories (pagodas) can still be visited, on days when the National Trust condescends to run a ferry. Despite the prosperity, Suffolk remains a proper place.

There are houses of character to be had. Clarke & Simpson (01728 724200) has a number of old farmhouses to show you. I like the look of 17th-century, Grade II listed Hill Farm at Sternfield, outside Saxmundham, a mere three miles from Snape Maltings. As with many Suffolk houses, the timber has been covered in plaster, to keep out some of the wind in what sounds like an exposed position. Still, the views sound good. With five bedrooms, it's on the market for £695,000. The same agents are offering a five-bedroom farmhouse at Peasenhall, in a wonderful location, for the same price. The next village, Sibton, has a notable pub, The White Horse.

Framlingham is one of my all-time favourite towns. William H Brown (01603 221797) has a charming Grade II listed, one-bedroom cottage with a courtyard garden for £135,000. Hill House, a five-bedroom Regency villa of white Suffolk brick with a low slate roof, is on the market with Clarke & Simpson (as above) for £475,000.

For sale: Benjamin Britten's Suffolk

Knodishall Place, Saxmundham, Suffolk £2.5m. A six-bedroom refurbished former rectory with tennis court and 6.25 acres (Savills, 01473 234800).

Fir Tree Farm, Framlingham, £725,000. A four-bed farmhouse (Huntingfield Estates, 01728 724566).

Rosemary Cottage, Aldeburgh, £315,000. One-bedroom terrace within walking distance of the beach (Jennie Jones Estate Agents, 01728 454622).

Clive Aslet is the editor at large of 'Country Life'

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2013