

opinion

Lockdown has helped many of you enjoy Suffolk's secret heritage

Fiona Cairns of the Suffolk Preservation Society explains one benefit of the strange last four months



In my most recent columns, I've reflected upon the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – and society's responses to it – from the aspect of what most concerns us here at the Suffolk Preservation Society.

One of the upsides of the lockdown is that it has reinforced how important the natural world is to many of us living in Suffolk – and just how much we've missed it.

Such a positive absence is reflected in people's interest in the man-made heritage that previously was somewhat taken for granted or perhaps we were simply too busy to notice. The closure, until very recently, of all our historic churches has made many yearn to see inside them again and to savour their great architecture and peaceful atmosphere.

The lockdown has also meant many more people are working from home which has given them the opportunity to walk footpaths and bridleways on their doorstep that they may never have had the time to explore before. We've recently been contacted by a number of people who have raised concerns about quirky or even unique heritage that is on their doorsteps, but tucked out of the way and almost lost from view.

A number of these structures seem to be under threat, either because of their condition or due to proposed development. These newfound "discoveries" prompt an interest in their past as well as their future and SPS has been contacted for advice or support.

The first is the Decoy Cottage (pictured), a delightful cottage ornee, or decorated cottage, deep in the Orwell Park at Nacton. Built in the 1850s to house the Decoyman and his family, it is a highly ornate grade II listed building next to a lake.



45 Chapel Street, Woodbridge

Pictures: TIMOTHY CHILVERS/TOM MCDONNA/BOB KINDRED



Nacton Decoy Cottage

The cottage is well maintained and in use, but it is the lake, or decoy itself which is a fascinating relic of a previous age. A decoy is a body of water, designed for the purposes of catching duck, typically a pond or lake with several channels coming from it spanned by net covered arches, called "pipes", narrowing as the channel progressed. A decoyman would use a dog to encourage ducks to swim down the "pipe" where they would eventually be trapped. In the 1800s there were around 400 decoys recorded in the UK, but by the turn of the

century this had already declined to around half that. Very, very few remain accessible and/or identifiable today.

The Nacton Decoy was constructed around 1820-1830, the main pond has four pipes, each overlooked from an elevated position by wooden "gazebo" for which the duck on the pond could be observed without disturbing them. Surrounding the pond are earthwork channels which allowed a person to move around the perimeter of the pond without showing themselves to the duck on the pond.



St Edmund's monument at Hoxne

The Nacton Decoy became the most successful and efficient decoy in the UK; between 1895-1969, nearly 300,000 ducks were taken, totals eclipsing any other recorded "takes" from any UK decoy. But in 1968 the Nacton Decoy ceased commercial operation; it was the last commercially operated decoy in the UK. Subsequently, for a time it was leased by the Wildfowl Trust and operated for ringing purposes, but no longer. Surprisingly, the last decoyman only retired fairly recently.

A public footpath is located close to the Decoy Cottage,

allowing walkers a close look at this lovely building. However, the decoy is not publicly accessible. It is a fragile man-made structure, no longer in use and now that the last decoyman has retired its future is very uncertain.

Local campaigners are investigating what can be done to work with the landowner to see if it can be restored, but not necessarily to full working order.

Much more humble, but under immediate threat, is a small agricultural workers' cottage in Chapel Street, Woodbridge (pictured).

Tucked away down a little lane, it is a non-designated heritage asset and is a simple, yet charming weatherboard cottage that gives a glimpse back to a simpler world. It sits in a large plot that was formerly used for market gardening and locals recall scrumpling from the orchards. However, it is currently facing demolition and replacement with a modern single storey dwelling.

Thanks to a keen-eyed neighbour, the Society has been notified and has joined in the campaign to save the cottage.

The final somewhat-out-of-the-way case is one that should be close to the heart of everyone who loves Suffolk and its history. In the village of Hoxne, there is a monument to the martyred King Edmund (pictured). Although this memorial was only built in the mid-19th century, it was constructed on the site of an ancient oak, itself believed to be on the very spot where Edmund was killed by the Danes. It sits isolated in a field which can be viewed from various footpaths, but the fact that it is slightly remote from the village contributes to its commemorative qualities.

Now there is a proposed development of houses in front of St Edmunds Monument, the design and scale of which, if granted permission, may suburbanise an important part of Suffolk's history.

The parish council and many local residents are not accepting this lying down – and neither are we, as the Society is supporting the campaign.

So, in short, by getting out more than usual, many people have come across – or come to better appreciate – the secret heritage in their areas. Let's hope that this interest endures.