

# A good walk Castle Acre & Nar Valley Way, Norfolk

Just behind the houses and the big, flint-built Bailey Gate in Castle Acre's main street, a great castle fortified in the 12th century by the de Warenne family stands in ruins on its 100ft mound, still strikingly severe and dramatic.

We walked the ramparts and descended into the ditches, picturing those desperate days of civil war between 1135 and 1153 when Stephen of Blois and the Empress Matilda contested the English crown and only the strongest stronghold gave security.

The ancient thoroughfare that brought friend and foe to the walls of Castle Acre, a route known nowadays as Peddars Way, had been in use for millennia when the de Warennes held sway here. We followed the old road out of the village to where the River Nar dimpled over shallows of flint and sand across a wide ford.

At South Acre, St George's Church stood by the roadside. Inside we admired the ornate, 20ft-tall medieval font cover and the intricately carved foliage of the old rood screen. In the north chapel Sir Edward Barkham (lord mayor of London, 1621-22) lay in stiffly splendid effigy on a tomb chest beside his wife, Jane, while on the floor near by the 14th-century brass likenesses of Sir John and Lady Katherine Harsick lay fondly holding hands.

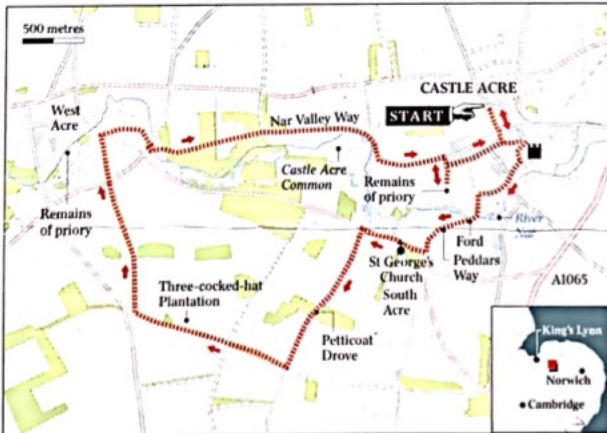
Beyond South Acre the sandy lane of Petticoat Drove climbed out of the shallow Nar Valley through gently undulating corn and beet fields. A rising wind whistled in the tops of ash and sycamore as we passed Three-cocked-hat Plantation. Dropping down a long grassy lane towards the River Nar again, we caught glimpses through the hedges of tall blocks of flint masonry, the remnants of West Acre's Augustinian priory.

The Nar Valley Way led homewards along duckboard trails, over squelchy ground and on past the juicy reedbeds and marsh ground of Castle Acre Common. This valley was nicknamed the Holy Land for its many religious houses, and on the outskirts of Castle Acre we found the Clunian priory established by William de Warenne at about the same time as the castle.

Guarding the tight cluster of monastic buildings stood the tall west front of the abbey church, superbly built and engineered, sculpted with a row of stone heads more pagan than Christian, enigmatically staring down as they have done for almost 1,000 years.

**Start** Castle Acre, near King's Lynn, Norfolk PE32 2AE (OS ref TF 816152). **Getting there.** Flexibus from Swaffham (to book, tel: 0300 123 1145). Road: Castle Acre is signed off A1065 between Swaffham and Fakenham.

Walk 7½ miles, easy, OS Explorer 236. Follow signs to castle (819152); walk ramparts. From SE corner of precinct (820150), right along Nar Valley Way/NVV. At Bailey Street, left (819150, "Peddars Way"/PW). In 100m, right (PW) up Blind Lane. In 100m, fork left (white acorn); at T-junction (816148),



left past ford (816146). Just beyond Church Farm, right along road (812143). Pass South Acre church (810143); in 350m, left (807144, "Restricted Byway") up Petticoat Drove. In ¼ mile, right at grain silos (801133, "Circular Walks"/CW); in ¼ mile, right (788137, CW), north for ¼ mile to cross road (785148). In ¼ mile, cross NVW (785151); bear left ("public footpath") across common. At ford, right along road (789151); in 50m, left (NVV) for 2 miles back to Castle Acre.

**Lunch Picnic** by River Nar ford. **Accommodation** Pig Shed Motel, behind the George & Dragon pub, Swaffham Road, Newton by Castle Acre, Norfolk PE32 2BX (01760 300037, thepigshedmotel.co.uk). Breakfast is available on pre-order only. **More information** Castle Acre castle and priory, english-heritage.org.uk; Kings Lynn TIC (01553 763044). More walks at christophersomerville.co.uk **Christopher Somerville**

## The birdwatcher

Red beaks and yellow legs: how to spot the UK's 'new gulls'



There are two kinds of seagull that are drifting in small numbers about the British Isles that are not very familiar to British birdwatchers and need to be looked out for carefully. One is the Mediterranean gull, which has a black head. It sometimes consorts with our own black-headed gulls. However, our so-called black-headed gull has really something more like a simple black facemask that does not cover the back of the head.

The Mediterranean gull in summer has a thoroughly black head that is altogether a more noticeable object, large and even pot-like, with a thick red beak with a drooping tip and dark red legs. In winter the head has more of a black mask and the nape is grey.

This gull first bred in Britain in 1968 and there are now probably almost 1,000 pairs nesting here, some in marshes among black-headed gull colonies, where its deep calls can be heard among the others' lighter cries.

The other "new" gull is the yellow-legged gull. These are very like herring gulls and until recently were considered to be a subspecies of them. However, they stand out because they have rich yellow legs, while the herring gulls have pink legs. The yellow-legged gull is also first sometimes spotted by its darker grey back. It is well-known to tourists in the Venetian lagoon, where it sits on the poles that mark the route of the boat from the airport.

They have begun to nest more frequently on roofs in southern Europe. Most of the individuals that come to Britain towards autumn probably come from such places as this, and there are a handful of breeding records in Britain. Yet it is unlikely to become as well known — and unpopular — as the herring gulls that search beaches and dive down to steal fish and chips from holidaymakers.

Derwent May

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