

Alluring village nestles

IT'S easy to miss the delights of Blythburgh as you hurry past on the A12. But, as DAVID LENNARD and KATE MAXWELL found out, north Suffolk's hidden gem has much to offer

Charles plays host to 'hubs of communities'

AT THE heart of the village, overlooking the River Blyth and the mudflats where oyster catchers and avocets feed, is the White Hart Inn. On a clear day Southwold's water tower and lighthouse are just visible on the horizon from the waterside gardens of the Inn.

Landlord Mike Davis will this month be a guest at Highgrove, Prince Charles' home, where he has been invited to lunch in recognition of the White Hart's central role in community life.

For in addition to the traditional pint and a meal, the pub also provides a sub-post office and a village store, providing essential services which were nearly lost when the original store closed. Mr

Davis, who has been landlord for four-and-a-half years, said the coal barn next to pub was a perfect site for a small village store and post office, so he had it converted and it opened in 2000. Locals can also take their dry cleaning there, and hire videos and DVDs.

The move was praised by Prince Charles, who described the pub as being the "hub" of the community, playing the sort of role which would keep villages alive.

Mr Davis will travel to Highgrove in Gloucestershire on May 27 for a celebratory lunch and tour of the grounds for the people who have turned the "Pub is the Hub" campaign into a reality in their own hosterries.



HIGHGROVE HONOUR: Prince Charles and the White Hart Inn, left, with landlord Mike Davis, inset

Photographs: EADT

THOUSANDS pass through Blythburgh every day but those who do not take the chance to linger in this village are missing out on one of north Suffolk's gems.

The A12 between Lowestoft and Ipswich cuts the village in half. It opened Blythburgh has always been an important landmark for travellers by road, rail or river.

At the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 the village was part of the royal estate. It was also a large Christian settlement and this tradition continues today dominated as the village is by Holy Trinity Church - renowned for its original medieval colouring and angel roof. The remains of 18 pairs of carved, painted angels are suspended from the roof beam

The present church, dating from



1412 was originally an Augustine priory - the remains of the 12th Century priory are on private land at the back of houses in Priory Road and cannot be visited.

Known as the Cathedral of the marshes, Holy Trinity dominates the skyline for miles around during the day and at night when it is even more spectacular lit up by powerful floodlights.

The church is a regular venue for concerts and Prince Charles paid a visit for one of the concerts in the country churches programme.

Of the many legends linked to the church the most famous centres on a great storm in August 1577 when lightning struck the steeple and lumps of masonry fell on to members of the congregation killing three of them.

It is said a great black dog leaped

under soaring landmark



HIDDEN GEM: It is easy to miss some of the hidden delights of Blythburgh

Photograph: KATE MAXWELL

down from the roof and ran out of the great north door. Marks left by the dog's paws are still said to be visible on the door.

A few yards on either side of the A12 are some of the region's most picturesque cottages - some are available as holiday homes.

The village was an important port of call between Southwold and Halesworth when the River Blyth was the main travel route.

When the Southwold Railway between the two towns was opened in 1879 Blythburgh had its own station.

England's only three-foot gauge railway closed in 1929 as more and more passengers and freight switched to the ever-growing road network.

Throughout its history the people of Blythburgh have had a great sense of pride in their village and this is still very much in evidence today.

When the parish council decided on a new village sign to mark the Millennium they chose one that aroused interest all over the region.

The East Anglian Daily Times revealed in May 2000 that black-

smith Graham Chaplin, who runs the Iron Oak Forge in Buxhall, near Stowmarket, was working on an Angel of the East village sign.

The angel is five feet high with a wing span of six feet, painted a mixture of whites, reds, golds and ivories.

Mr Chaplin was inundated with calls from people eager to know in which village it would be installed.

It was eventually revealed the Angel of the East had been commissioned by Blythburgh Parish Council at a cost of £1,800 to mark the Millennium to be sited close to

the parish church. Mr Chaplin also told how the design had been taken from one of the carved wooden angels inside the church.

The Angel of the North but it shows residents want to let everyone know how proud they are of their village.

Surrounded by heathland, the Blyth valley and only a few miles from the coast, Blythburgh is also at the centre of a network of footpaths enjoyed by many walkers.

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Ghostly goings on at the heath

ON THE southerly approach to Blythburgh lies a landmark picnic site called Toby's Walks, a hillcock, gorse-topped area with a distant view of the great parish church, the Cathedral of the Marshes.

Local legend has it that back in the mists of time a young soldier, Tobias Gill, who was camping at Blythburgh, wandered drunkenly over the heathland when he encountered a girl named Ann Blakemore.

The next morning Ann was found dead, and Toby was arrested for her murder and hanged. The gibbet used for the hanging remained standing for 50 years. When it eventually fell to pieces a thatcher used the nails to make a thatching comb. Toby's ghost is still, so they say, wandering the heath.

The Sandlings heath was originally forest which was cut down to make way for grazing cattle and sheep. The soil, being sandy, is poor, as the nutrients are washed away, and the area became heathland, purple with heather in late summer.

Walks was the name given to areas of heath grazed by sheep looked after by shepherds. The hills and hollows of Toby's Walks were formed by quarrying for building materials. The area is now



covered with golden flowering gorse, which once provided fuel for humble cottages, but now provides nesting sites for linnets, yellowhammers and whitethroats.

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