



Broadland Memories

The following article was transcribed, as written, from the 1886 edition of "Holiday Notes in East Anglia" which was a booklet produced by the Great Eastern Railway to promote rail travel to the region. Several editions of this publication were produced in the late 1880s and there were often articles about the Broads within them, usually reprinted from other magazines and newspapers - in this case, the footnote at the bottom mentions that it was reprinted from the Daily Telegraph, August 11th 1883. Sadly, there was no mention as to who the author was.

On the "Broads" Great Yarmouth

However unpicturesque, however flat, however unfashionable the good old town of Yarmouth may be, it has still reserved to itself a custom that is highly to be commended. The homeliness and heartiness of this sandy playground are never more felt than when the labours of the day are over, and the visitors at the various hotels find themselves comfortably ensconced in what are virtually the private apartments of mine host or mine hostess, where they are courteously invited to smoke the last pipe or cigar and to enjoy a tobacco parliament under the presidency of the head of the house that covers them. It has been often asserted, and with justice, that the personal relations between an innkeeper and his guests have become very much strained by modern custom. Monster hotels, management by proxy or deputy, representatives instead of landlords, managers in lieu of masters, have to a certain extent deprived the traveller of that "warmest welcome" which the poet Shenstone so feelingly described as making an inn the very counterpart of home itself. Yarmouth, to its credit let it be said, is evidently determined to reform as far as possible this strained relationship between visitor and host. A town that is so hospitable in its propensities, so distinguished for its freedom, a seaside resort that has oyster-stalls and taverns on its marine front, and where the sailors' beer-shop and the "Barking Smack" are of vastly more importance than the fashionable company hotel, is scarcely likely to stand upon ceremony in the matter of public smoking-rooms. The consequence is that at the very best and most fashionable inns at Great Yarmouth visitors do not need to wander off at night to a cold and comfortless smoking room where they may or may not find congenial society; but are at closing hours made welcome in the cosy parlour, where domesticity is not forgotten, and where courtesy invariably prevails. I must own that it was even a welcome change to be rid for the moment of music-hall minstrelsy, piano organs, oyster stalls, fish salesmen, cheap photographers, gipsy fortune-tellers, touting boatmen, and all the main features of Yarmouth popular life, and to find oneself admitted into the family circle of enthusiastic sportsmen, thoroughly familiar with the county and the district of which so few visit Yarmouth know anything at all. People know the sands at Great Yarmouth, they are patent to every beholder; occasionally they take a trip to the quiet watering-place of Gorleston, with its queer old wooden pier, its secluded beach, and its respectable retirement; they excursionize to Cromer in one direction and to Lowestoft in the other; but how few really know of the miniature Holland that might be opened up to every tourist who cared to visit Yarmouth by the Great Eastern Railway from Liverpool street, or by the daily steamer from the wharves below London Bridge.

It was in such a hospitable smoking-room as I have described that I first heard mention of these broads of Norfolk and Suffolk, which are the delight of the angler, the yachting man, and the contemplative philosopher. The Fisheries Exhibition of South Kensington, which has done so much good in other respects, may no doubt have directed public attention to these inland lakes, gay with yachts and wherries and pleasure boats; to the pretty rivers, well stocked with fish, that give sport to the angler and many a sketch to the artist; to the canals and cuttings that are the connecting links between one broad and another; and to the little fishing inns between Norwich and Yarmouth which are not less primitive than picturesque, and as comfortable as Thames-side inns were before gudgeon and mutton chops were served up by waiters in white ties and dress-coats, and "neat handed Phyllis" was sent back to her cows at the nearest village. I own that I listened with open ears when I heard of an Eastern lake-land and waterway where a week or a fortnight could be profitably spent; of a system by which yachts could be hired by the day or term; of a network of streams, river-courses, and smiling lakes, interspersed with villages, water-meadows, or sedgeland, and bordered with banks edged with reeds and gay with wildflowers. It fairly astonished me to find that I was in the immediate neighbourhood of a romantic and picturesque region, not scared alone, as I had thought, to the shooter of wild fowl in the winter, or to the skater when the Norfolk broads are frozen over; but capable of being utilized profitably by the angler with his creel, by the yachtsman with his handy cutter, by the naturalist with his note-book, by the botanist with his specimen case, or by the lover of nature.

The first practical question concerning these broads of Norfolk and Suffolk was how to get at them in the easiest fashion, and how to see the most of them in the shortest possible space. To the lazy man who has no responsibilities everything is possible. The sportsman in winter or the angler in summer can pitch his tent at Wroxham or Reedham, at Somerleyton or Oulton, and hide himself with ease from his fellow men. Such enthusiasts as these discover a comfortable corner and manage to keep the secret of it pretty much to themselves; but it is not so easy for the unenlightened tourist to get a days fishing, a weeks yachting, or an afternoons pleasuring without some of the local advice which I happen to find in the smoking-parlour of a first-class Yarmouth hotel.

The question of how to get to the Norfolk broads was answered by ready voices. There was the convenient steamer that plies between Norwich and Yarmouth, and discloses the varied scenery easily and cheaply; there were those brown sailed wherries or covered barges always to be seen on the Yarmouth quay, whose mates would be delighted to welcome any passenger on board that would pay his footing at the modest rate of half a crown; there were boat-letters at Norwich or Oulton prepared to accommodate visitors with ready equipped yachts, with sleeping berths and provisions, at so much the week; there were scores of angling inns all over the district with boatmen and tackle as complete as can be found at Marlow, Cookham, or Henley; and, last, there were the railways in direct communication with every one of the spots made famous by Norfolk sportsmen and county historians. Each one was loud in the praise of his own favourite method of visiting the broads. The yachtsman was eloquent on the subject of the fresh salt breezes over Breydon Water, the matches at Oulton Regatta, the independence of the sailing "house-boat that could lay up for the night in some snug corner, allowing for a fresh bathe in the early morning, and a sweet sleep by the reeds and rushes of the quiet river"; the angler pictured the content of the fishing inn with a comfortable bed when the dreary labours of the day were over; the hurry-scurry site-seer naturally preferred the "jumbo" steamer with its rush up to Norwich and back again; whilst the artist had something to say in favour of the train and its direct communication between one spot and another; as preferable to the yacht that does not wait when a good breeze is up for sketches or sentiment, or the angler whose whole soul is engrossed on his rod and line, and who carries meditative selfishness to a pitch unequalled in any other form of sport.

For my own part, I was inclined to split the difference by trying the experiment of a Yarmouth wherry, one of those gaily painted, pretty barges that give such a Dutch character to the scene at the quay, and form such a striking feature on the view of the river and broads as seen from the windows of a railway carriage between Yarmouth and Norwich, or Norwich and Cromer. Even on an English canal there is something delightfully indolent in the easy motion of a barge. No car disturbs the helmsman, pipe in mouth, as he leans upon the ledge of the decked cabin; a smile illuminates the face of the good wife who pops her head up for a breath of fresh air between the cares of peeling the potatoes for dinner or brewing a dish of tea for the evening meal. No wind or tide affects the British bargeman; so long as his horse can go he can follow – it is only a question of time and endurance. He can smoke, he can eat, he can muse; the course he follows may be monotonous, but the surrounding scenery is often quietly beautiful. The mate of a Norfolk wherry is not always at such an advantage; he is dependant on the wind for progress and for the carrying of his merchandise and, when the wind drops, his "towing" has to be done by the spare hand on board, or he has to fall back upon the tedious and unexhilarating process of "quanting", which is really "punting" with big poles. No yacht that sails on the broads can wholly dispense with "quanting" in a dead clam, though woe betide the amateur who attempts to "quant" even a moderate-sized yacht without practice on one of those reedy rivers on a hot summer afternoon when the wind has failed. Still, for all that, I have observed that a wherry with its one red brown sail can get along with less wind than any other craft, and I was prepared to journey to Wroxham in the stern of a painted cargo-barge for half-a-crown, had not my landlord, who is an old and experienced yachtsman, the owner of a famous prize-winner on the broads, and as experienced an amateur as sails, offered me a seat on board his vessel during a trip to one of the local regattas. It was impossible to see the scenery of the broads under greater advantage, or with a more experienced guide. Close by the Vauxhall Railway Station the pretty vessel was awaiting us with sails set, and the top sail ready in case of a sluggish breeze; and as the little cabin was well stocked with good things, and had plenty of accommodation, it did not much matter whether we got back at night or slept under some reedy bank alive with water fowl and musical with life. As it turned out, a more delightful day could not easily have been spent by one unaccustomed to the strangely silent and delightful country. Skimming across Breydon Water, with Yarmouth fading in the distance, and the windmills – they are properly watermills – dotted about right and left, it might have been the Scheldt which we traversed instead of an English lagoon; whilst up the Waveney, and travelling by river and canal to Oulton, there were pictures as delicate and graceful as can be found on the Dart or Avon. It does not need to be a yachtsman to admire these little salt water lakes, flicked with foam and whipped by the wind, over which the pleasure yacht wings its way like a bird, the bows cleaving the green water, and the wavelets breaking crisply by her side; it does not require to be a fisherman to be lost in admiration of the silent streams, when not a sound is heard but the chatter of water fowl, the sway of the bending reeds, or the hum of innumerable insects that wing their way from flower to flower. No artistic skill is needed to turn the mind to the cattle pictures, the tree embowered villages, the old stone towers, or the dreamy charm that this river-land presents. It will be enough if yachtsmen on other rivers, anglers of other streams, and lovers of nature never weary of new impressions, turn their attention to the rivers and broads of Norfolk and Suffolk, still isolated and comparatively unfrequented in spite of the railways, to ensure that they will go there again and again.
