

Lavenham

England's finest mediaeval village, Lavenham has plenty to recommend it. With truly wonderful places to stay, excellent restaurants, pubs and cafés, and an enormous variety of galleries, boutiques and antique shops, the greatest challenge is fitting everything in.

The Swan Hotel, whose history dates back to the 15th century, is an enchanting treat, its roaring log fires and cosy interiors the perfect place to recharge the batteries. The Great House's French restaurant has been variously described as 'cracking' and 'the best restaurant in Suffolk' by national foodies.

Lavenham has an abundance of galleries. The Crooked Gallery, another splendid example of 15th century architecture, offers a fascinating selection of paintings, ceramics and textiles, while other galleries specialise in sculpture, stained glass, tapestry and contemporary art.

Perhaps the best way to make the most of Lavenham is on foot. A number of circular walks weave through the historic lanes taking you on a journey to explore mediaeval England at its very best.

The walk:

Lavenham specialised in a coarse, woad-dyed broadcloth known as Lavenham Blewes, famous as far away as Northern Russia. In 1524 it was England's 14th richest town yet, within a generation, its cloth industry had collapsed.

The walk follows the old railway line through a deep cutting, returning along an adjacent footpath through pretty countryside before heading to the church of St Peter & St Paul.

1 Tenter Piece

A short distance from the church is Tenter Piece, an area of ground with wooden frames upon which cloth would be stretched 'on tenterhooks' to dry and be shaped.

2 The Market Place

Lavenham's market charter was granted by Henry III in 1257. In 1357 the lords of the manor acquired freedom of tolls for Lavenham cloth merchants to trade throughout England.

Little Hall, built in the 1390s for the Causton family of clothiers, is one of the oldest timber-framed buildings in the village and the only domestic mediaeval hall house open to the public.

The market cross was a bequest from William Jacob, a wealthy clothier.

The Guildhall of Corpus Christi is one of the finest timber-framed buildings in Britain, built around 1530.

Trail Details

- Distance:** 5½ km / 3½ miles
Duration: 3 hours
Parking: The Cock Inn (or Prentice St)

3 Barn Street
Formerly known as Hockerells Street, its occupants included some of the town's wealthiest merchants; only a few of their houses survive. William Jacob lived in Molet House, once a magnificent structure four times its current size.

Further down the hill is the Old Grammar School, dating from the 15th century. One of the school's most famous pupils was John Constable.

4 Water Street
Water Street's name derives from the open sewers which once ran along it. Water was essential for washing fleece and rinsing cloth. Around 1500 the cloth merchants diverted the water underground, demolishing most of the buildings and building a series of brick-built culverts, which still exist. The houses running along the south of Water Street were rebuilt directly over them, a continuous row of fine jettied buildings that reflected Lavenham's wealth.

5 Lady Street
Lady Street has had several names - its current name comes from the belief that Our Lady's Guild Hall was situated further down the street. It became known as the Wool Hall in the 18th century and was partly demolished in the early 20th century to be shipped to America; outcry from village residents saved it and it is now part of The Swan Hotel.

Further up is The Grove, which has at its core a fine timber-framed building, thought to have been the 'headhouse' of Thomas Spring III, Lavenham's richest cloth merchant and the wealthiest commoner outside London.

6 Church Street and the parish church of St Peter & St Paul
There has been a church here since before Domesday, but most of today's structure was built between 1485 and 1525, funded chiefly by the de Vere and Spring families - their emblems can be seen around the church.

