

## *A Day out In Suffolk*

Four intrepid travellers set off under the tutelage of Howard Whisker towards Sudbury.

One of the gems of northern Essex is to be found along a small country lane in Little Maplestead, a few miles northwest of Halstead and south of Sudbury. Locally known as The Round Church, it sits nestled in a beautiful spot among several ancient yew trees on the crest of a small hill. It certainly merits a visit, as it is a very pretty little church and one of the most historically important buildings in the area.

Officially known as The Church of St. John the Baptist, this Round Church is one of only four round churches still in use in England. Its history dates back to the Middle Ages, although the early records are unreliable. It is generally believed that there was a church near to the site of the current one in late Saxon times, as a priest is mentioned in the Domesday Book, but there is no documentary or archaeological evidence to support this.

St John the Baptist is attractive, unusual and unique in Essex. Its design is modelled upon the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and was built by the Knights Hospitallers in around 1335.

Inside the quiet environment evokes powerful emotions-it is one of those churches that has you reaching into your pocket to help to support its journey for another few centuries. There are, of course, many churches with round towers most are in Norfolk but this one a *proper* round church is indeed a true gem.

With Howard reminding us that the time had come to re-board the car we headed for coffee in Sudbury, in a delightful general store with a 'coffee corner'. Our main objective of the day was to visit Gainsborough's house, before its upcoming closure and major upgrade, which we hope does not destroy its charm. Gainsborough's House is the birthplace of the leading English painter Thomas Gainsborough RA and the house is now a museum and gallery, located at 46 Gainsborough Street in Sudbury, Suffolk, England. A varied programme of temporary exhibitions is also on show throughout the year. The works feature Gainsborough of course but there is an eclectic mix, indeed some exhibits were quite a surprise. At the time of our visit a display of extravagant dresses by Vivienne Westwood was being admired and wondered at by all.

This is a house with many rooms on different levels all packed with wonderful works, even the pictures on the staircases cause you to pause in wonder. All this for a cost of £8 with a discount if you are a member of the Art Fund. You need to allow an hour and a half at the very least to do this building and its contents justice.

Staff at Gainsborough's House Museum will relocate to an information point next door during the 18-month redevelopment project.

Our last port of call was to the Munnings Art museum, the former home of the artist Sir Alfred Munnings. He called it "The house of my dreams". The house in Dedham Vale on the borders of Suffolk and Essex has a lovely garden, the artist's studio and a large number of his works. Munnings was a major figure in the great tradition of British horse painting. We had come to see the house, his works but also a temporary exhibition in particular: In 1918 Alfred Munnings was appointed as a war artist in France for the Canadian cavalry Brigade. He was prolific as with all his painting but he achieved both quantity and quality.

We had experienced an educative and enjoyable day. Rex Bourne

