

RURAL RECLAMATION: SUFFOLK

IN THE SECOND OF OUR SERIES, WE LOOK AT HOW
CREATIVE RECLAIMING AND SALVAGING IS HELPING
RURAL COMMUNITIES TO THRIVE. HERE, WE
REPORT FROM SUFFOLK

WORDS DEBORAH TALBOT

The hamlet of Flatford, known as
'Constable Country' after the
artist's famous paintings.



Part of the waterfront marina in Ipswich.

Suffolk is nothing like the image depicted in John Constable's 'The Hay Wain', a print of which adorned the wall of my family home some 40 years ago. The painter is celebrated as part of the county's heritage, but the image of old English rural idyll is far removed from the reality today. Because the first thing that strikes me about Suffolk is how bold human statements exist side by side with radical countryside. Take the Orwell Bridge over the River Orwell on the outskirts of Ipswich. Its concrete brutalism towers over the flowing river and marshland, a remarkably honest statement of human aspiration.

Ipswich
People in the county often say that the rural towns and villages dislike the urbanity of Ipswich, but it is Ipswich which gives Suffolk its beating pulse. Undergoing radical regeneration in the town centre and waterfront, and with its lack of fear of tower blocks and profound change, it lifts the spirits with the kind of energy I've only ever seen in cities. And it's not just about infrastructure, says Amanda Bond of Visit Suffolk (visitsuffolk.com): 'There's a real passion associated with artisanal activity in the county, embracing and developing skills spanning hundreds of years. In part, this is responsible for the growth of independents and pop-up shops, bread makers and chocolatiers.'

Best of Both

While nearby Essex is defined by its relationship to London, Suffolk feels more geographically remote – even if there are regular trains from Ipswich to the capital. Its remoteness and connectedness means that it seems pulled two ways; towards the wilds of East Anglia as well as southern urbanity. This pull influences its creative production too, says Onitha Jarrold of 'Rekindled by Onitha'. 'Craft is being embraced by the modern generation which is both about the traditional craftsmanship associated with rural living and the new technologies and design skills available in the centre. This combination allows for some exciting new possibilities and creations,' she says.

Ipswich itself shows signs of this tension between the traditional and modern, with its hip reclamation shops such as Lady Norfolk and Lord Rust (Instagram @ladynorfolkandlordrust) and the shop/café Fish Face Upholstery (Instagram @fishfaceupholstery). Everyone I speak to says there's been a growth in arts in recent years, boosted, says Sarah Holmes of New Wolsey Theatre, by initiatives like StartEast, which helps build cultural projects across Suffolk. And it's not just confined to Ipswich, says Sarah. 'All of the Arts Council's national portfolio organisations based in Ipswich deliver some of their work in the surrounding rural areas.'

There's a free flow of creative energy between urban and rural, which makes Suffolk one to watch. ➡



Rekindled by Onitha

Onitha Jarrold launched 'Rekindled' in 2016, after years of collecting and upcycling furniture for personal use. After completing an upholstery course, she held a pop-up sale in her garage in Westerland, Suffolk. 'I was overwhelmed by the number of people who came along and either bought or commissioned pieces,' she says.

Upcycling has been big news for years, but Onitha interweaves her work with an artistic sensibility: 'When I am working on a piece I imagine the stories it could tell and the lives it has been a part of,' she explains. As a consequence, her creative process produces work that is high-end design rather than the ubiquitous 'shabby chic' style. The pieces heavily contrast the old and the new: 'I naturally choose reclaimed items over more modern pieces, but I also love how the contrast of old and new works to highlight the best features of both.'

She argues that reclaiming has a strong narrative in Suffolk, because of its rurality: 'The history of rural crafts and the idea of sustainable living encourages the use of reclaimed locally produced items,' she says. Her business is enhanced by a thriving creative community which is 'supportive and nurturing'.
Instagram: @_rekindled



One of Onitha's re-upholstered vintage pieces.



The Boot, Freston



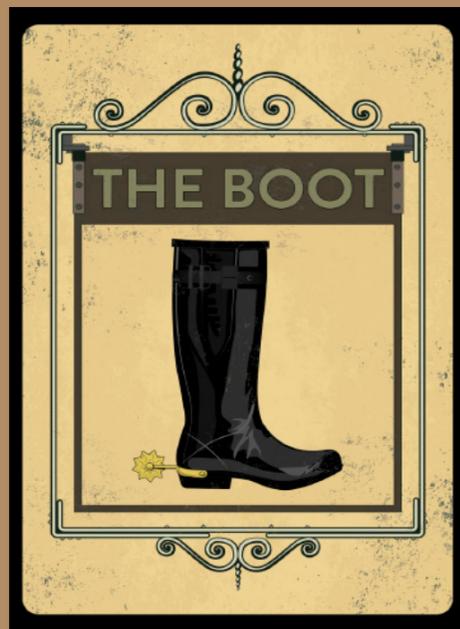
Possibly one of the most innovative projects in Suffolk opens this month. The Boot at Freston is a pub, restaurant, wedding venue, independent cinema, livestock holder and meat and fish smokery, complete with

artisanal food and crafts sourced locally and regionally. Mike Keen, the owner, is busy imagining his vision into being. He is a passionate advocate of the new Suffolk, which combines reclaiming, rurality and the best of the contemporary UK.

The Boot is a 17th century pub located in the village of Freston on the outskirts of Ipswich. Inhabited by around 100 people, Freston has 'no shops and barely a church,' says Mike. Reopening The Boot, which has been closed for eight years, is not just a business, he argues, but is about reviving community too, with groups for parents and pensioners to help overcome isolation.

The Boot will be a rural pub with a difference – because of Mike's love of reclamation. 'It's about character,' he says, 'there's been a recent trend in doing up dilapidated pubs, which is great, but a lot of them have been done by just throwing money at them.' The Boot is already looking distinctly modern rustic, with the bar moved to the side of the building and the exposed brickwork and traditional lathe and plaster in the process of being restored. Reclaimed furniture will complete the look.

thefrestonboot.co.uk and Instagram: @thefrestonboot



Upcycled and reclaimed pieces give Old Jet's interior a welcoming aesthetic.



© CRAIG GIRLING

A vintage drum speaks of the musical sensibility at Old Jet.



© CRAIG GIRLING

Jesse Quin, Keane bassist and founder of Old Jet.



© NICK LLOTT

Old Jet, Rendlesham

Founded by Jesse Quin, bassist in Keane, Old Jet is an art and cultural centre with offices, co-working spaces, music studios and a recording space, located in rural Rendlesham. It is one of the most ambitious reclamation projects in the region, slowly converting part of an old Royal Air Force base (now called Bentwaters Park) from 2013. Hence the name Old Jet, a very hipster nod to its former use. It was originally intended as a recording studio, says Jesse, but he soon realised there was a need for a more collaborative creative space of the type he experienced in London and Bristol. 'When I moved back to Suffolk,' he says, 'I soon realised that there are tonnes of talented people slogging away in the arts in isolated studios.'

Old Jet also runs events, classes and a monthly film club, functioning as an important source of sociability and networking in the area.

Jesse believes that Suffolk is finding its place as a home for creatives, driven by the cost of living in London and new infrastructure improvements in the county, such as broadband. And it offers a unique creative sensibility that is distinct from the frenzy of the city: 'There is no sense of competition or cynicism, only a feeling of support and encouragement,' he smiles. 'That leads to people having the confidence needed to produce their best work.'

oldjet.co.uk and Instagram @oldjet