

FINDING ANGELS AND SAINTS IN SUFFOLK

RECENTLY VOTED AS THE HAPPIEST PLACE TO LIVE IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND BY RIGHTMOVE, BURY ST EDMUNDS IS A CHARMING MARKET TOWN IN SUFFOLK THAT IS FULL OF CHARACTER. GISELLE WHITEAKER HITS THE HIGHLIGHTS.

St Edmund is a rather interesting saint – and as the patron saint of pandemics, it seems to be his year. It's only fitting, then, that when my boyfriend Elio and I have the opportunity to escape the confines of our home, we find ourselves heading to Bury St Edmunds. We're not going because of St Edmund – it's more the town's reputation as Suffolk's foodie hotspot that has drawn us here – but you can't visit this historic spot and not learn a little about King Edmund, the original Patron Saint of England and King of East Anglia.

John Saunders from Bury St Edmunds Tour Guides is our go-to source of information. He meets us in front of the ivy-clad Angel Hotel, itself bound up with the history of the town, to impart some of his wealth of knowledge. The Angel, he explains, has stood on this site since medieval times. The current building dates from around 1780 and until the railway came in 1846, it was an immensely popular coaching inn. Amongst other notable visitors, Charles Dickens has stayed here. We're in good company then.

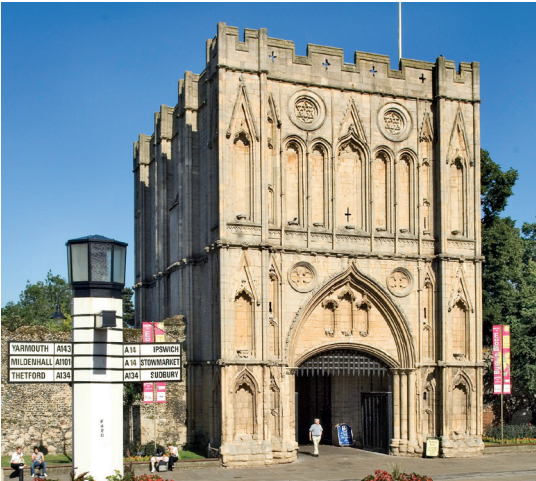
John points out the Athenaeum to the right, built early in the 18th century as Assembly Rooms where people could play cards and attend balls. He gestures to the green dome on the roof, an observatory housing a Victorian Troughton & Simms 4-inch refracting telescope. Unfortunately, the observatory can't be accessed as it is in need of restoration, but John's hopeful that it'll one day be open to the public.

We stroll through the abbey gate, no longer opposite Abbeygate Street courtesy of an uprising in 1327, during which the townspeople knocked down the original gate. When the gate was rebuilt 20 years later, it was moved to the right to hinder a direct approach. Through the gates, the Abbey Gardens await, the final vestiges of summer colour just beginning to fade from the garden beds.

We meander past the Peace Garden, a quiet nook featuring a one and a half metre tall teardrop sculpture that commemorates the holocaust. A more recent memorial is positioned nearby – the world's first internet-enabled



The Angel Hotel, Bury St Edmunds



Abbey Gateway



Abbey Gardens and St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Photo credit: Sue Warren

bench. It was installed in 2001 and customised to allow seating for four people, who could plug their laptops into modem jacks for free. It doesn't look like much beyond a simple park bench, but this is a Guinness World Record holder.

Deeper into the gardens, the ruins of the 11th Abbey of St Edmund and Benedictine Monastery, once one of the richest, largest and most powerful monasteries in England, are overlooked by St Edmundsbury Cathedral. John points out two areas of crumbling remains, one resembling a rooster and the other a teapot. He counters this levity by recounting the somewhat gruesome demise of King Edmund back in 869. When pressed by Danish invaders, the King refused to give up his Christian faith so was tied to a tree and shot full of arrows before being beheaded. His body was found but his head was missing. It was later discovered by his supporters being protected by a wolf. They returned the head to its biologically correct location and the first of many miracles occurred, when the head and body fused back together.

The Abbey was desecrated during Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries and Edmund's remains went missing in action. The whereabouts of the saint remains a mystery today. An effigy appears in the Great Churchyard beside St Edmundsbury Cathedral, along with a wolf on guard, sculpted by Dame Elisabeth Frink. I like to think he has found peace here, looking towards St Edmundsbury Cathedral, the Norman Tower, once the principal gateway into the great abbey church, to his fore. To his rear are several post-medieval houses built into the old walls like overgrown hobbit houses.

There is more to Bury St Edmunds than the abbey and cathedral. John walks us through the streets, painting a picture of life here through the ages as we pass points of interest, like a small community garden that features what may well be the best view in town, the old corn exchange and a picturesque alley where the owners take pride in their colourful window boxes. We duck inside The Nutshell, another Guinness Book of Records title holder. This is the smallest pub in Britain and it's home to some rather eclectic décor, including currency notes covering the ceiling like wallpaper and a mummified cat strung up above the bar.



Abbey of St Edmund remains and St Edmundsbury Cathedral in the Abbey Gardens
Photo credit: Tom Soper



St Edmund and the wolf by St Edmundsbury Cathedral

By the time John waves farewell, leaving us to explore further on our own, he's passed on his affection for this character-packed locale. We've yet to sample some of the fine Suffolk fare that drew us here, though. It's time to dine.

We freshen up in our sumptuous suite at The Angel Hotel – the hotel was refurbished last year and it's spectacular. Our Contemporary Superior room is exactly that, with an enormous bed loaded with long-haired cushions, eye-catching splashes of crimson in the cushioned headboard, a pair of leather armchairs with hide coats and a large freestanding copper bath in the spacious bathroom.

The hotel's restaurant has also been updated, featuring an exposed brick wall, teal crushed velvet banquettes and mustard chairs and a wall of art. Curios are dotted around the space – a stack of books here, a stag's head there, and an exquisite ceiling display comprising ceramic feathers that our waiter Tom says is aptly titled "Angel Feathers".

Like the décor, the dishes are beautifully presented. We start with a king scallop and fish gratin that is smooth and creamy, but has a hint of hellfire within. The foie gras parfait paired with fig chutney is likewise divine, melting in the mouth with a sweet aftertaste. The slow-cooked short rib main with stock-pot carrot and smoked garlic mash falls off the bone onto our waiting forks, while the crispy skin on



A Contemporary Superior room at The Angel Hotel



The stylish restaurant at The Angel Hotel



Warm Comte on a malt loaf with honey-roasted figs

the pan-roasted hake in a Thai coconut sauce is heavenly. It seems odd having cheese on toast as a dessert, but the warm Comte on a malt loaf with honey-roasted figs is not out of place. It's the peanut butter parfait with cherry sorbet, though, that sends us into raptures.

Late the next morning after a delectable breakfast, we walk to the Greene King Brewery for a history walk and virtual tour. In these Covid times it isn't possible to enter the brewery, so instead, we learn the history of brewing in Bury St Edmunds. Our guide Steve, like John, has a clear appreciation for the town, along with a connoisseur's appreciation of a fine brew, which he deftly passes on through the tasting portion of the tour. We leave ruddy-cheeked with smiles on our faces, packed full of beer facts.

The smiles linger long after we leave the town. Bury St Edmunds is that kind of place. Like a fine beer, it warms your belly and leaves you wanting another taste.



Scott Taylor, Head Chef at The Angel
Photo credit: Rebecca Austin

INFO

To book your stay at The Angel Hotel, see www.theangel.co.uk
For other things to see and do, visit www.burystedmundsandbeyond.co.uk



Foie gras parfait paired with fig chutney



Pan-roasted hake in a Thai coconut sauce



Peanut butter parfait with cherry sorbet