

# Treasured islands

*Lindsay Want visits South Elmham Hall in the Waveney Valley, where conservation award-winning farmers, John and Nicole Sanderson, call a bishop's palace home*

"With you in a moment," calls a cheery voice from far across the courtyard and somewhere up a ladder. "Feel free to have a wander. Won't be long!" Out by the great moat on four-acre South Elmham island, hidden away in The Saints not far from Bungay, the big blue-sky day has no clouds to stop the sun from playing on the wide waters. Just the gentlest intermittent breeze sends insects scudding across the surface towards emerald lily-pads and makes the broad leaves of towering beeches dance and dapple the grassy pathway below. In the distance, white flecks and flinty greys of ruined walls peep between the tree-trunks. Sounds of a lowing herd drift across the ancient island acres, and by the little bridge, the tiniest kingfisher flash of bright amber and iridescent turquoise colours the world even more timelessly beautiful.

"That's got the bunting sorted," beams Nicole, bumping the world back to a different sort of 21st century reality. "Excuse the clothes, will you – I've been mowing lawns, herding hens and who knows what this morning. We're mid-harvest, so there are lots of extra things to keep an eye on. We've a wedding in the medieval barn and courtyard tomorrow." She explains how they'll also be sharing their mellow farmhouse home - the Grade I listed, former bishop's palace - with the happy couple and handful of entourage. "Just to make their life simpler."

## LONG-STANDING LEGACIES

The offer of a quick cuppa leads us past a 'primeval' fire pit and ancient grove, detouring briefly to sneak a peek at the secret garden and Bishop Henry Despenser's ruined 14th century gatehouse with its homemade St Cross bricks, before finally entering the big blue door

to South Elmham Hall. In the huge space that is the farmhouse kitchen, John – the third generation of Sandersons to love, care for and farm South Elmham's historic lands - has already got the kettle on. He beams a heartfelt welcome, excuses himself while he climbs out of the morning's blue overalls, then with words balancing great knowledge with genuine enthusiasm, leads the way under smooth stone arches, past hewn fireplaces to share delicate traces of medieval wall-paintings.

South Elmham slowly reveals its true colours as its stories unravel, just like the green, mustard and deep ochres of the intertwining branches of the wall decorations painted here more than seven centuries ago. An ancient episcopal estate, the 7th century Bishop's 'See' or court of Elmham was favoured by Herbert de Losinga, the Norman Bishop of East Anglia who founded Norwich Cathedral in 1100 and had a soft spot for hunting.

"South Elmham became a 'des-res' at the heart of a deer park," explains John. "A great hall, in which to hold court, was built, with chambers and a private chapel for the bishop. Maybe as the palace took shape in the 13th century, painters and decorators working on Norwich Cathedral had a busman's holiday here. There are certainly striking similarities in the decorative style. Experts date them to 1270 – that's probably the earliest domestic wall-paintings in these parts."

Fortified by tea over tales of crenulations granted to Bishop Despenser for quashing the local Peasant's Revolt, it's time to head out over water-meadows, past pockets of wood pasture, across swathes which have somehow dodged the ploughs of 'progress'.

"Here, the hedge-lines show where the deer

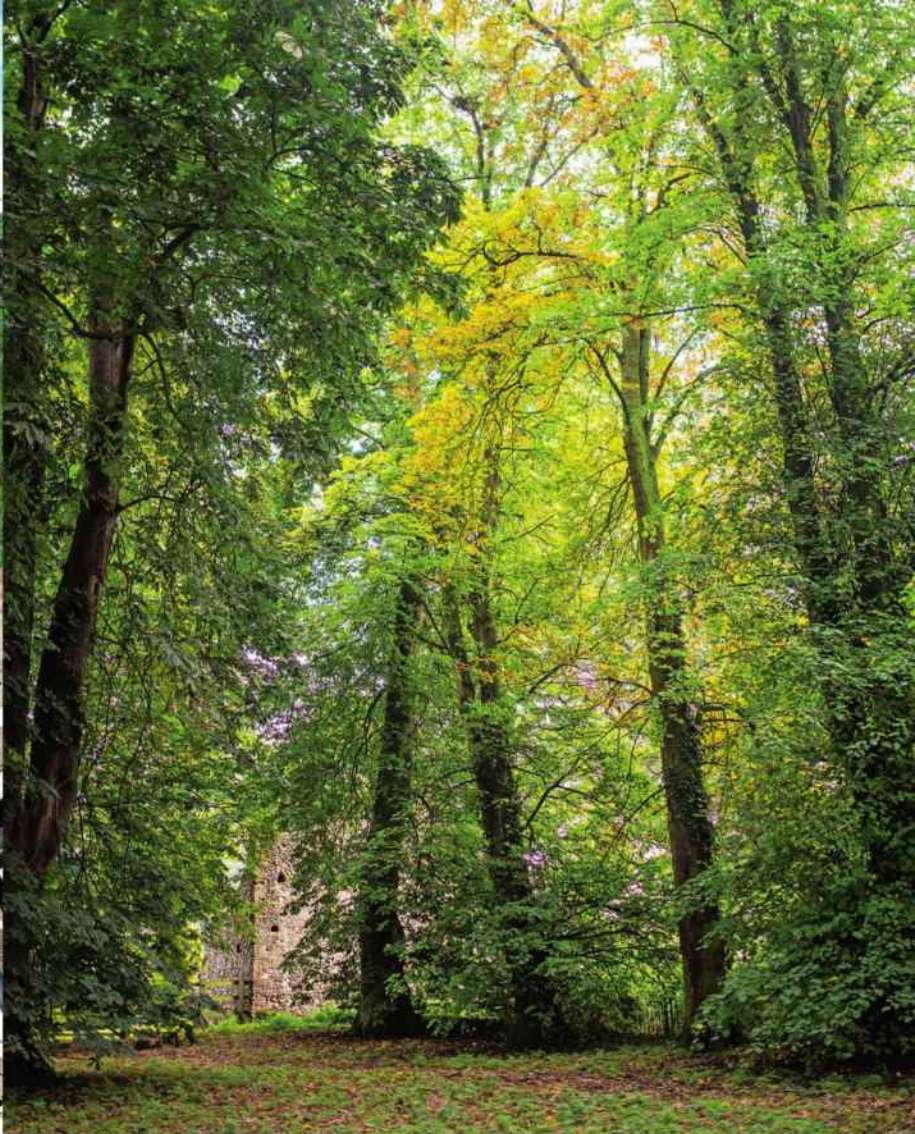


John shows the homemade bricks in the 14th century gatehouse. Photo: Lindsay Want

***'All weddings at Bateman's Barn are green, not just because this is a working organic farm where diversification is key. It's not us being prescriptive, but just the way we operate, because it's what we believe in'***

PHOTOS: COURTESY BATEMAN'S BARN





park was divided," explains John. "Some of the old parkland was dug over in 1940, but much has never seen the plough. It's been the farm it is today since the 1920s when the Adair family sold up the estate, but my family were tenant farmers here before that, from 1906." His organic British white cattle, once a favourite with religious orders, are undoubtedly at home here, just like the flocks of goldfinches, the roe deer, Ragged Robin and King Cups, hares and hawks. Perhaps the natural world has changed little since Edward II visited in 1326, or the Abbess of Flixton chastised the resident bishop of 1350 for his hunting parties which trampled her precious gardens.

### CAREFUL CONSERVATION

John talks about the farm's recent involvement in a pilot scheme for Results-based Biodiversity Achievements in Agriculture run by Natural England. He had to buy a suit to share his experiences at a conference in Brussels, but tiny South Elmham was somehow at ease playing a role in the bigger picture. By the collection of ancient coppiced hornbeams, there's talk of new woodlands and hedges, barn owl and bat boxes, ponds restored and wildflowers planted to nurture birds, bees and butterflies. "Part of our income from weddings always goes towards our conservation projects.

That's so important to us," explains Nicole. The sensitive restoration of the 1270 barn over a decade ago, not only keeps the beautiful building in use, but allows the site as a whole to share and be shared in so many ways.

"All weddings at Bateman's Barn are green, not just because this is a working organic farm where diversification is key. It's just the way we operate, because it's what we believe in. We love local and source everything we can from as close to home as possible, encouraging low food miles, engaging with local businesses and developing a productive, collaborative network of cross-promotion through our Waveney Weddings Collective."

A few steps further, the trees part to reveal a second treasured isle, a strange fortified enclosure at whose heart rests the enigmatic ruins known as South Elmham Minster. It's a mysterious place which has pulled in countless generations of pilgrims from far and wide, the legendary home perhaps of East Anglia's original Saxon cathedral. The walls are 11th century, but this is a place where history is a feeling, a place which puts tiny South Elmham in the biggest picture.

It's the first and last piece of the puzzle in a wonderfully unique Waveney Valley spot where past and sustainable future go hand in hand. ♦

### VISIT SOUTH ELMHAM'S SECRET ISLANDS

John and Nicole offer exclusive tours, including a guided walk to the minster ruins, via the Suffolk Historic Houses Invitation to View scheme (2018 dates: April 2, May 31, July 5, September 13. £18 including refreshments), a regular programme of pre-book or 'pop-in' house-only tours (Thursday afternoons April 1 - September 30, £10) and pre-booked groups. Full details and how to book: [www.southelmham.co.uk](http://www.southelmham.co.uk) or tel: 01986 782526  
Bateman's Barn South Elmham offers exclusive indoor and outdoor island weddings. Viewing is generally by appointment. Waveney Weddings Collective Wedding Fair & Open Day on Sundays May 6 and September 23 (11am - 4pm). [www.batemansbarnweddings.co.uk](http://www.batemansbarnweddings.co.uk)