

Gainsborough Line

Rail Ale Trail

Why not explore a great afternoon out, taking in some wonderful scenery, fine ales, country pubs and a pretty train ride? Leaving the car behind means that everyone can relax and enjoy the day, no parking to find and everyone can enjoy a few drinks together. This visit is just a snapshot in time, as menus undoubtedly change and seasonal beers come and go out of favour and availability. The constant that remains however, is gentle day out enjoying the Essex and Suffolk countryside on one of the prettiest branch lines in the region.

The Gainsborough Line runs from Marks Tey on the Great Eastern Main line to the market town of Sudbury and is named after the famous landscape artist who was born in the town.

Our journey starts as we meet up at Marks Tey station. There's a little coffee shop in the ticket office so you can start off with a snack and a coffee to set you up for the day! The line opened in 1865 and today runs a reliable service



with modern trains along the 11-mile meander from Essex to Suffolk. The first and last trains of the day run through to Colchester but otherwise, all trains stay on the branch line, tripping up and down the line every hour.

We set off on the 12.01 and tootle along the narrow line and within seconds, England's rural landscape opens up to bring us plentiful countryside vistas.

The first stop is Chappel and Wakes Colne. Two small villages sharing not just this station but a once more significant railway junction. Unused sections of the old line now form an impressive must for rail enthusiasts and makes up the East Anglian Railway Museum, worth a visit of its own on another day. Exiting the station looking back you get a sense of Victorian splendour and in fact some of the original station rooms are restored to their original glory. It's hard to believe it's only a little village station with various offices and spaces resplendent in their heritage livery. As we head left out of the station and down the road towards Wakes Colne, it soon becomes apparent that the

station building is but a minor preamble compared to the imposing and magnificent viaduct that we inadvertently travelled over to get here.

We head across the road and a five minute walk from the station brings us to The Swan for our first drink stop. This pub dates back to 1350 and offers several different spaces



to enjoy a drink (or food from an extensive menu) and it's all first class quality. You could move rooms in this pub and genuinely feel you've been in more than one venue – a pub crawl all on its own including an enclosed courtyard among the different spaces. Just up the road is the Colchester Brewery and their range of excellent beers are often

offered at the Swan and two were available during our visit along with Chelmsford Brewery's 5% 'Under Cascading Skies'. The Colchester ales on sale during our visit were Metropolis, a golden ale ideal for the summer and Sweeney Todd a fuller flavoured more traditional bitter.



Despite the fantastic rooms in the pub, the killer view is outside where you can appreciate the full viaduct's span from directly underneath. The image wouldn't be out of place in a Yorkshire tourist guide and takes many unsuspecting visitors by surprise. Already the trip has proved a fantastic

experience. Over 6 million bricks were reputedly used to build the 32 arch viaduct,

designed by engineer Peter Bruff and it is the largest bridge East Anglia. I contemplate all of this while enjoying a magnificent pint of Metropolis.

We could stay here all afternoon but we are trying to fit in a whole range of other experiences, so head back to the station over the river Colne at the back of the pub for a 7 minute train trip to our next stop, Bures.

The station at Bures couldn't be more different than Chappel. A simple, single platform leading directly down the hill to the village – or rather villages. Bures (pronounced Byurs) is where Essex meets Suffolk by the river Stour. Bures Hamlet is on the Essex side and Bures St Mary across the border in Suffolk. The pubs too are on different sides of the



border with the Three Horseshoes around 10 minute walk – possibly quicker if you don't pause to look at the church, WW2 pill box and views over the river Stour. The Three Horseshoes doesn't serve food but do offer a good choice of real ale: London Pride, Tribute and Greene King IPA during our visit. All were well looked after and one customer piped up "The best wet pub in Suffolk".

With no food available we stepped back into Essex and into the Eight Bells. Lunch here is served until 2pm and there were also 6 real ales on offer: Timothy Taylor's Landlord, Lacons' Norfolk Gem, Nethergate's Suffolk County, and Greene King's IPA and Abbott. Plenty to choose from and all in good form! The Landlord has been at the pub for 45 years, so knows a thing or two about the business and has a good solid offer of hearty food and great range of beers. We opted for the ham egg and chips which was a good choice and perfect accompaniment for an ale.



It's under 5 minutes back up the hill to the station where we take the last part of the journey on the branch line to Sudbury.

Sudbury is a market town with plenty of charm, history and cultural offering. You could have a beer-based tour just around the town as there are several traditional pubs, contemporary eateries and a Wetherspoons all in close proximity. We chose to visit Mauldons' Brewery Tap, under 10 minutes walk from the station.

Suffolk's big breweries of Adnams and Greene King need little introduction, but Mauldons have been an award winning brewery for longer than both of the 'bigger' Suffolk brands and have been making ale since 1795.

The Brewery Tap has a great atmosphere with regular music and events, billiard table and on offer alongside three of Mauldons' own brand ales was a surprising guest ale. Mauldons' Silver Adder was in excellent condition as you would expect at the tap house and was a nice refreshing drop as a pale and well balanced beer. I would always have had the dark and velvety Black Adder had it been on draught, but the Suffolk County was there alongside Mole Trap, so a nice variety of flavours on offer. We tried the guest ale too, but it didn't hit the mark compared to the Mauldons offering – I guess that's a good thing really!



We could have squeezed another round in but headed off to the train and were safely in Marks Tey by 5.45 so in under 6 hours on our Gainsborough line escapade we had taken in some lovely scenery, a country pub lunch, tried out four different pubs and 5 different beers each.

The sign of a good trip out is that it leaves you wanting more and we could certainly have spent longer at each of the stops: Art gallery and railway museum at Chappel, local stories and a nature trail along the Stour to explore at Bures and a host of tourist attractions in the market town of Sudbury. This was a lovely day out though and a chance to see some fantastic scenery, traditional pubs and

perfectly presented distinctive ales made in the local area. It's also worth remembering that there are two beer festivals at Chappel's rail museum every year so you can extend the great connection between trains and beer in an even more immersive experience!





A Rail Ale Trail itinerary (based on a Saturday)

Your train ticket allows for breaks in the journey, so a return ticket covers you for this schedule.

12.01 Marks Tey – Sudbury

Exit at Chappel & Wakes Colne 12.07 turn left out of the station and down Station Road, cross over the main road and The Swan is in straight front of you. Under 10 minutes walk. If you are taking the next train, this leaves you 40 minutes at the pub! Leave 12.57 arrive back at station for.....

13.07 Train to Bures

Exit at Bures on arrival at 13.13 and head down from the station to Station Hill then turn right onto Colchester Road the Eight Bells is in front of you. Lunch stop!

14.30 Back the way you came on Colchester Road briefly but then head to Bridge Street and over the bridge. Then follow Church Square round to the right, then bear left and the Three Horseshoes is in front of you. Leave at 15.00 for the 10 minute walk back to the station.

15.13 Train to Sudbury

From the station head along the lane and right onto Great Eastern Road towards the main junction. Keep on the right-hand side and cross over Newton Road continuing up Girling Street until reach East Street (2 mins). Turn right and along East Street about 30 metres The Brewery Tap is on the left.

To visit other pubs in Sudbury there are multiple options in the centre accessed by heading back on East Street and staying on this road to the town centre. Several pubs are within a 10-minute walk of the station so you can enjoy some more ales, something to eat or head back home or even do it all again in reverse order!

17.34 Train departs back for Mark's Tey

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19.34 Train departsssss.....