

This extract from *A Mind's Journey to Diss*, written to Mary Wilson, the wife of Prime Minister Harold Wilson, by John Betjeman, is brought to my attention by the artist John Atkinson when we meet him at his studio during a visit to Norfolk.

"You get a lot for your money here," said John, who relocated to Diss from London eight years ago and is accompanied by Treacle, a little dog that daughters Harriett (4) and Heidi (2) enjoy stroking.

"It's only about an hour and half from the capital," he added, pointing out that the city's closeness has allowed him to hire a chef from London for his latest venture, a restaurant in Diss to compliment the delicatessen he already runs.

John, an entrepreneur, ran restaurants, delicatessens and a graphics business in the city for a number of years before buying and renovating a property in the picturesque market town with his wife Juliette.

Since he is a successful artist, it comes as no surprise to hear that he will be exhibiting his industrial-themed paintings in the new restaurant at The Boilerhouse in Cobbs Yard.

It's easy to see why Norfolk appeals to an artist, not least because of the large skies and flat landscapes that are reminiscent of France, but the magical compositions of Nicholas Simington from Old Buckenham focus on people.

Nicholas studied at Glasgow School of Art and it is nice to drop in on him and his wife Barbara to see his latest picture. "Each one can take me six months to produce and parts are modified until I get it just right," he revealed.

Norfolk is full of many more success stories, as we discover during our stay at Fritton Lake Lodges, part of Lord Somerleyton's estate in Fritton in North Norfolk.

The estate was purchased by carpet manufacturer Sir Francis Crossley in 1863 and has been in the family ever since, which is quite an achievement in itself these days and has partly been made possible by the current Lord Somerleyton's successful Fritton Lodge venture, which features 80 or so self-catering lodges set in 250 acres.

We stay in a three-bed lodge with all mod cons and views of the lake. My wife particularly enjoys the convenience of the washing machine after family days out when we return in a state.

There is an outdoor centre, a pub and hotel here, too, and it is possible to visit Somerleyton Hall, now a wedding venue. Fritton Lake Lodges provides a good base for becoming better acquainted with Nelson's county.

Horatio Nelson was born to a prosperous family in Burnham Thorpe on September 29, 1758 and died Vice Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805 aged 47.

As we are not far from Great Yarmouth we decide to visit this seaside town, braving some pretty chilly winds during our winter/spring visit. The wonderful golden sand of

the beach is arguably blighted by the sight of the numerous wind turbines in the sea.

We note during our travels around the county that solar panels are becoming quite a popular choice for generating electricity, more so than in any other county we have visited.

At Norwich, again not that far from Fritton, we have chance to mooch around this historic city and find a nice spot in front of the market to eat our sandwiches and savour the afternoon sunshine.

Afterwards we visit the castle, which dates back to 1096 and is constructed of flint and mortar, faced with a cream coloured Caen limestone. The cathedral was eventually completed in 1145.

Generally the sun greets us through the large windows of our base at Fritton Lake Lodges, but on one grey day we are unsure whether or not it would be wise to spend it outside at Thrigby Hall Wildlife Gardens just outside Great Yarmouth – but it proves the right choice.

The first character we meet is Monty the talkative cockatoo who we discover is actually noisier than Heidi, which is quite an achievement. We are mesmerised by the crocodiles in the swamp house and cannot believe how long they can hold a particular pose with their mouths wide open. We had to go back a few times to check they were actually real (they are).

It is pleasing to see that all of the animals are given so much room to roam, especially the gibbons, who enjoy a good swing during our visit. Harriett and Heidi enjoy watching a pair of them looking after their little baby and become incredibly curious when the baby starts feeding from the mother.

Afterwards our two little monkeys chase each other along the wooden trails and enjoy the wooden tunnels for animal spotting. It is the close up look at the Sumatran Tiger through glass towards the end of our visit that truly captures Harriett and Heidi's attention.

With benches for picnics and mazes to provide yet more entertainment, Thrigby Hall Wildlife Gardens is a must to visit; Caroline particularly enjoys the little egrets in the Chinese willow pattern garden, which, with its suspended wooden bridges, is a joy to walk around.

Norfolk is home to a variety of attractions and at Hoveton, Wroxham, described as the gateway to the Norfolk Broads, we find Wroxham Miniature World.

We're not quite sure what to expect but we are surprised to find a variety of model railways and Scalextric sets. We are mesmerised at the size of these and our favourite is the Japanese railway, complete with cuttings from Japanese newspapers.

There is something very relaxing and enjoyable about watching model trains running across a track. The previous night we had watched a television



programme about Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke, who spotted that people were fascinated by trains.

He anticipated that there would be a demand for building model railways and so he began importing electric model trains from Germany, thereby starting the British fascination with building model railways. Frank Hornby and others then introduced cheaper models for the masses.

Aside from the beautiful dolls houses that have been lovingly created at Wroxham Miniature World, there are collections of toys of yesteryear that we all remember, from Sooty to the Smurfs, the Magic Roundabout to roller skates and Sindy.

It is always a joy to stumble upon a good local pub, something we do at The Bell Inn at Rickingham, Botesdale. This independently owned pub and hotel is set in a delightful village, which still has its own Post Office and newsagent.

The Bell is also the place to eavesdrop on local gossip, much of it supplied by a regular at the right hand corner of the bar. In short this is a great pub, a friendly place where travellers feel welcome and comfortable.

Friendly landlord Danuel is also the chef and makes a delicious homemade parsnip soup. This is followed by well presented and equally scrumptious fish and chips, mine accompanied by a pint of Adnams Ghost Ship, a tasty local ale. Caroline opts for a frittata, which she thoroughly enjoys.

On the way back, to break up the four-hour journey to Hampshire we stop off at the National Trust's Wimpole Estate, where we enjoy walking around historic Wimpole Hall, which dates back to 1640, and some of its 3,000 acres.