

A Walk of Two Midwives: a circular walk in North Norfolk

Introduction

This walk was inspired by a paper written by Julia Allison, a midwife historian and former General Secretary of The Royal College of Midwives, and I owe many thanks to her for additional information and her enthusiasm for the retrieval and safeguarding of the history of midwifery in the UK. [Please see *Midwives of Sixteenth-Century Rural East Anglia*, *Rural History* (2016) 27 (1), 1-19. DOI: 10.1017/S0956793315000138.]

The walk begins and ends at the village of Binham, a few miles inland from the north Norfolk coast, and offers a glimpse into the world of Mistress Fiske, a midwife living at Binham, and Margaret Burwood, a midwife living in Wells, in the 16th century. The information below provides some context for the places on the route.

Mistress Fiske

Mistress Fiske (we do not know her first name) lived in a fair-sized house in Binham. Her husband was a farmer and saffron-grower. Saffron was an important commodity (used as a dye) and was grown widely across East Anglia. Their house had at least two floors and contained a hall, a saffron kiln, a parlour and a number of bedchambers.

Julia Allison, citing the papers of Nathaniel Bacon (of whom more later), tells us that in 1599 Mistress Fiske attended, along with her servant, Mistress Calthorpe in Cockthorpe, the village immediately north of Binham. Mistress Calthorpe was the wife of Captain Calthorpe of the local militia. The walk will follow their likely route.

Mistress Fiske's brother-in-law was a ship builder and owner in nearby Wells-Next-The-Sea, where another midwife Margaret Burwood lived during the 16th century. It is very likely that Mistress Fiske knew the remarkable Margaret Burwood.

Margaret Burwood (1503 - 1598)

Julia's paper contains much information about this extraordinary woman who lived at Wells-Next-The-Sea. The parish register recording her death has this entry: "*She was a mydwife gracious, for mercy detains any woman under her hand. She was devoute, charitable to her abilities a good keeper of hospitality.*" She was married to Thomas Burwood (died 1578) for 51 years, gave birth to five children and, at the time of her death, had 18 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. She was, Allison writes, clearly a well-known and well-respected citizen of the area, and probably practised midwifery for over 50 years.

The walk will not visit Wells but you are strongly urged to visit the town before or after the walk and to visit the church of St Nicholas where Margaret Burwood would have presented the children whose births she attended for baptism, and where her grandson Robert was curate. Unfortunately the current church is a 19th century rebuild of the church which was standing here in the 16th century.

Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 24: Norfolk Coast Central

Route: easy

Length: 14 kilometres / 8 miles

Time: 3.5 hours

The Walk (14 km / 8 miles, 3.5 hours)

All distances are given in kilometres and metres as a comfortable walking pace is a kilometre per 15 minutes, thereby making time calculations easy.

Suggestions for parking in Binham: around village green or in Village Hall car park on Warham Road.



The Chequers Inn, Binham

- Set off from the Chequers Inn northwards (inn on your left) and leave the village centre on the road to Langham.
- When the road to Langham goes off at a right turn, keep ahead on the smaller, left-hand road.
- Follow this road for a kilometre, past The Ford House and then a narrow copse on your right.
- As the trees end and the road turns to the left, go straight ahead on the marked footpath, crossing farmland and a disused airfield.
- At the first old runway, the path crosses the field ahead at 1 o'clock.



One of the old runways at
Cockthorpe airfield

- Follow the path through a few trees to a footpath sign, and across a footbridge.
- Cross a second disused runway to a stile and cross the field to arrive in Cockthorpe.

You have almost certainly walked the same route as Mistress Fiske and her servant when going to attend Mistress Calthorpe in labour in 1599.

- Turn left to visit the church of All Saints where Mistress Fiske would have presented babies whose births she attended for baptism at the font (15th century). The key to the church can be collected from Manor Farm, the pink (in 2019) house opposite.

All Saints church dates from the late 11th century and in the south aisle is a wall monument to Sir James Calthorpe (died 1615) and his wife Barbara, probably the grandparents of the baby born in 1599. Lady Barbara died in 1639 and is recorded as having seen 193 of her descendants. The Calthorpe family may therefore have been very well known to Mistress Fiske and her journey between Binham and Calthorpe a frequent one! The tomb chest near the above monument may be that of Sir James Calthorpe who died in 1589, probably the baby's great-grandfather. The Manor Farm opposite the church is the likely site of the Calthorpe family home.

- Continue along the road after the church towards Stiffkey (turn right on leaving the church). This road can be busy at times so take care.
- As the road descends with a steep bank to your left, look for a track to your left. Although not marked on the Ordnance Survey map, there is a path along the field edge above the road, used by locals, which avoids motor traffic. Follow this to the signpost on the junction just at the entrance to Stiffkey (right hand road). NB Stiffkey is pronounced *Stoo Kee* and was home to the Bacon family.

The Bacon Family

Nathaniel Bacon (1547 to 1622) was the son of Sir Nicholas Bacon, Queen Elizabeth I's Keeper of the Great Seal, who began to build Stiffkey Hall in 1576 and lived there from 1578. Sir Francis Bacon, the philosopher, was his half-brother. The walk will pass Stiffkey Hall.

Nathaniel married twice, first to Anne Gresham (1549 to 1594), mother to his three daughters and a son. He was an MP and Sheriff of Norfolk and knighted by King James I in 1604. He left extensive papers giving much insight into late 16th and early 17th century life.

His eldest daughter Anne (1573 to 1622) was born at Waxham in the far east of Norfolk. It may have been in relation to this birth that Nathaniel's mother (also Anne) sent the attending midwife a piece of gold (see Allison's paper page 14). In 1575, Nathaniel Bacon's papers (unusually for the time) contain a reference to another payment to a midwife, almost certainly for his second daughter Elizabeth's birth in that year in Stiffkey. It is possible that the payment was to either Mistress Fiske (who lived 3 miles to the south) or to Margaret Burwood (who lived 4 miles to the west), both of whom who were probably attending births around 1575. The third Bacon child, son Thomas, died young and a final daughter, Winifred, was born in 1578.

- Continue over the bridge to the T-junction with the A149 and turn right. This is a busy road and there is a dearth of pavement for the next 100 metres so take care.



The river from
Stiffkey Bridge

- **Just after the village hall on your left, look over the wall on the right of the road to see Stiffkey Hall, home to the Bacon family. Elizabeth Bacon may have been born on the house that stood on this site in 1575 before the building of the Hall began in 1576 (see above).**
- **Next to the Hall is the church of St John, dating from the 13th century, where both Mistress Fiske and Margaret Burwood almost certainly played the traditionally important role of the midwife at many baptisms.**

In the chancel is a black marble monument to Sir Nathaniel Bacon, father to Elizabeth Bacon (see above). It was commissioned during his lifetime but the space for his death, (1622) was never inserted. The monument also tells us that Elizabeth married Sir Thomas Knivet of Ashwellthorp. You can get a view of Stiffkey Hall and gardens by peeping over the wall in the churchyard on the opposite side of the church from the entrance.

- **From the church, walk a short distance right along the A149 and cross at the end of the flinted wall opposite to take the footpath (before the bus-stop) on the left (Bangay Green Way) out of the village and across to fields to reach the Stiffkey Salt Marshes.**



Stiffkey Salt Marsh

- Turn left along the Norfolk Coast Path for 200 metres and then turn left along a clear footpath (Hollow Lane) and returning to the A149 at Stiffkey.
- Turn left past Stiffkey Stores (opportunity for tea and cake!) and then right down the road you entered Stiffkey by earlier.
- After 200 metres, ignore the road bending left to Cockthorpe and continue right, straight on along the smaller road heading south-west, signposted Warham and Wighton.
- Follow this quiet road for almost two kilometres until you reach a crossroads.
- Turn left and after 500 metres, turn right down a narrow lane opposite a footpath.
- Follow this lane past Short Lane Farm until you reach a T-junction.
- Turn left and after 300 metres, take a footpath straight ahead on the right (to the right of the small aerial), just as the road veers slightly to the left.
- This path becomes a grass path after the farm (Lousybush Lane and then Hall Lane). Beware of free-range chickens around the farm if you have a dog off lead. After a kilometre, continue in the same direction on the road.
- After a few metres, turn left down a grassy path leading behind houses and gardens and across a gravel driveway to a road. St Mary's Priory (dating from 12th century) is reached via the gate opposite and a grassy path. St Mary's Church would have been a place that Mistress Fiske knew well and where she attended many baptisms at its splendid font.
- Return to the village centre by turning left on leaving the priory.



The font at
Binham Priory



Binham Priory

Deborah Hughes
With thanks to Julia Allison for inspiration and Helen
Murphy (and Tess and Clemmie) for company