

Harleston

Friendly Invasion Walking Tour



*Visit
Harleston*



Funded by
UK Government



During WW2 more than 300,000 Americans settled into airbases scattered across East Anglia.

This is a self-guided walk which tells the story of Harleston during the Friendly Invasion from 1943 to 1945.

Follow the map from 1 to 15 and enjoy lots of interesting facts to discover along the way.



Photos courtesy of American Library, Memorial to the 2nd Air Division, 8th Air Force, United States Army Air Forces

This 'Friendly Invasion' had the biggest impact on the landscape, culture, and people of East Anglia since the Norman Conquest.

In Harleston, locals would watch the planes gathering above in box formation. They counted them out on hundreds of missions and counted them back, witness to the many who did not make it.

And local children were thrilled when the 'Friendly Invaders' handed out treats at a time when chocolate was scarce and chewing gum unknown.

1. Old Market Place

On 7 December 1942, a cold Monday morning, the first American trucks and jeeps trundle into a town worn down by three years of war and strict rations. It's been a year since the USA declared war on Japan and Germany.

Every Friday the electric air raid siren on the Clock Tower is tested. Every evening the same mournful wail reminds people it is blackout time. Harleston's men and women are fighting or imprisoned as POWs. Reserved occupations and infirmity keep the rest at home, many doubling up as Home Guards. These are dangerous times, even in the countryside. **Continued**



Old Market Place Continued

The USAAF have arrived at Hardwick Airfield, four miles away. Huge Liberator bombers are gathering in the sky in daytime, replacing the American Thunderbolt fighters of 'The Wolf Pack' which had been passing overhead since July. At night the RAF armadas rumble through the night skies.

American trucks pull up here regularly, to ferry locals to dances and parties as more bases open in Flixton, Metfield, and Thorpe Abbots. Each with 3,000 men, all within five miles of Harleston. The town has fewer than 1,600 inhabitants.

Harleston is becoming a 'Little America'.

WALK>> to the pavement down the side of the JD Youngs (The Magpie during WW2) on the London Road.

- In 1940 a German bomber narrowly missed the Clock Tower before crashing, with the Hurricane fighters that shot it down circling overhead.
- In 1942 an RAF trainer crashed outside the town and three weeks later a fighter crashed nearby. On the same day an RAF bomber came down in flames over the town.
- On the site of the current Market Cross a large horse trough became a handy convenience for the many servicemen in town at night. The trough was removed at the end of the war.

2. The Magpie

This was a favourite place for US Servicemen where they tried out an unfamiliar game, darts. General (Ike) Eisenhower stayed at the house opposite and may have met Churchill in the Magpie. It's more certain that Ike's deputy and two other American generals stood at the bar.



Beer diplomacy

The Magpie was often in danger of running out of beer, so the Generals asked Lacons Brewery to increase supplies, up to two truck loads of beer barrels on some Saturdays.

Bicycles were the best, and often, only way of getting around. One local entrepreneur would look after them in a barn at the back of the Magpie for a penny, but just as many would be piled up outside.

The beautiful bowling green and pavilion (behind the pub) also proved popular, and the American Red Cross raised £300 in a darts tournament for the Red Cross POW fund, enough to buy a small house before the war.

One mile down London Road towards Weybread, was the 827th Engineer (Aviation) Battalion station.

These engineers repaired runways at incredible speed to bring airfields back into action after plane crashes. This base was also a popular destination for girlfriends travelling from Norwich. They'd arrive by train and walk past the Magpie, drawing comments from critical locals.

The 923rd Regiment of Aviation Engineers consisted of four Battalions, including the 827th. Most engineers in the 923rd were African American, with 162 officers to 3,268 African American servicemen. The 827th, stationed at Weybread during 1944-45, was made up of 30 to 35 mainly white officers and between 740 to 770 African American engineers. This was a time when segregation was still an accepted part of American life, particularly in Southern states, but extended to all the US forces.



WALK>> return to the Market Place and proceed along Exchange Street to No 4 on the left.

3. The Cinema

At the No. 4 Exchange Street doorway US servicemen and their girlfriends lined up to buy tickets for the latest movie. The cinema was a small, but purpose built room on the other side of these buildings. It was a penny to sit at the front and you had to pay more for the double seats at the back.



WALK>> cross the road and continue until you are in front of the imposing Corn Exchange.

- Soon after Christmas 1943 locals heard the sound of a battle-damaged Flying Fortress B17 Bomber returning from a raid on Germany, 'coughing and spluttering'. It flew low overhead and then crashed in Starston, the next village, near where a German bomber crashed the year before. All the crew were injured but survived.
- The previous month, two Flying Fortresses collided between Harleston and Eye, killing both crews and local people.
- A Flying Fortress and a Liberator also crashed at different times between Harleston and Diss.

4. The Harleston Corn Exchange

The town's frequent dances could be reached through the door along the side path as the front steps were only for exclusive balls. The women would sit around the sides waiting to be asked to dance with the compere threatening to stop the music if quarrels broke out over dance partners. The local swing band was very popular and played across the area. The USAAF, such as the Engineers from Weybread, organised children's parties here, a thrill for children who had been on rations for years.



Breaking the rules
The building also acted as the court house, with cells beneath it. Here both men and women were fined for breaking the strict wartime rules.

5. The Old Post Office

Across the road on the corner the imposing Post Office (now a private residence) was so hectic at Christmas with people writing to folks back home or to loved ones fighting on different fronts, that the USAAF loaned staff to help.

WALK>> down the Green Dragon Lane alley next to the Old Post Office and turn right on Church Street, for a few paces and stop in front of No 4, Market House on the right.



The Air Raid Warden (ARP) noticed a house nearby was not obeying full black-out rules. He knocked twice and then pushed the door open only to find the female resident cuddling a USAAF Officer. Ironically, she was one of the most vocal in objecting to the Engineers' girlfriends walking past to their base.



6. The Hope

During the war, Market House was The Hope pub which was also popular with servicemen inviting their girlfriends into 'the snug' on the right. The men would head for the public bar on the left and return with drinks to the snug. Generous and gregarious US servicemen were paid three times that of the British and were understandably popular.

WALK>> down the next lane to the right called Hope Alley and turn right across the Old Market Place road to Briar Walk, previously known as Crown Yard.



7. Crown Yard

Mrs B and a friend lived in Crown Yard, and they entertained the visiting servicemen at home once the pub closed. There was laughter and loud talk, and neighbours had to lock their doors to stop accidental visitors blundering in. When Mrs B's husband returned from the Royal Navy for the first time in two years, she presented him with her new baby.

WALK>> back along Old Market Place and continue to King George's Hall.

Mustangs and paper fuel tanks

In Spring 1944 the new mighty Mustang joined other aircraft in the skies, carrying what looked like two 'bombs' beneath. These were extra fuel tanks made of papier mâché, for dropping after use. The Mustangs were called 'our little friends' by the bomber crews, grateful to have this new escort all the way to Germany.

8. King George's Hall

This was another major venue for dances and meals. The popular local swing band played here regularly and the meals provided by the local USAAF bases were greatly appreciated by both adults and children. There were also joint services meals hosted by the Red Cross, with the British Army and the USAAF dining together.

WALK>> up the right of King George's Hall to find the Museum.



9. Harleston Museum

In the porch there are some photos from the time of the Friendly Invasion which you can view at all times. Entry is free and the museum is usually open 10am-12noon Wednesdays and Saturdays from May to September.

WALK>> back to Old Market Place and then along Broad Street passing St John's Church and take a seat at the town's WW2 Memorial.



The Memorial

British, Commonwealth, and Americans who died are all remembered in their own towns and countries. The nearest airfield Thorpe Abbots stands as a special memorial, as it was home to the 100th Bomb Group, the 'Bloody Hundredth' which lost 177 planes and 732 men. The original and evocative control tower, witness to all the missions, still stands today alongside the 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum www.100bgmus.org.uk. Visit if you can.

Look across the road at number 15 Broad Street, Cobblers Cottage, where Bertie Bond, a WWI veteran mended shoes and enjoyed playing the cornet, entertaining passing Engineers from Weybread. Bertie's daughters were excellent and popular dancers at all events and some airmen became good family friends. One daughter said "There were good girls and not so good. You could tell the difference when they jitterbugged. We didn't."

If you spot Straight Lane, you can walk up to see a highly personal memorial to the crash of two B24s from Flixton. It takes about 15-20 minutes to get there. See the last page for more information.

WALK>> continue along Broad Street and go to the point where it meets The Thoroughfare.



A Big Bang
7.30pm, 5th July 1944 the entire bomb dump ignited at Metfield airfield. Windows broke, buildings shook and people were blown over, miles away. 23 Liberators were rendered useless and the rest of them left with serious faults. Six men from the Forward Ammunition Depot died. The colossal explosion must have been one of the loudest ever heard in Britain and, soon after, Metfield became a secret operations base instead.

10. Junction of Broad Street and The Thoroughfare and Redenhall Road

Imagine standing here on the nights when thousands of tons of bombs passed across the railway bridge (now gone) over Redenhall Road on their way down Redenhall Road to the Forward Ammunition Depot near Earsham, ready to supply local airfields with additional munitions in preparation for to D-Day.

Redenhall Road also led to the Flixton / Bungay airfield and the Air and Sea Rescue airfield at Beccles, passing a field on the edge of Harleston.



A local police constable noticed tyre tracks leading into this wheatfield, damaging valuable crop, where he discovered a woman and an Engineer from Weybread. He took her name and informed them they were breaking the strict laws concerning food in wartime. A few days later another PC noticed more tracks and found a different couple and again cautioned them about breaking the law. During the hearing at the Corn Exchange both women were fined - for giving the wrong names and crushing crops!

WALK>> up Redenhall Road and turn left onto Station Road.

11. Old Railway Station

Station Road leads to the handsome old Railway station building. It's said that the Station Master met Churchill here, who was on his way to meet General Ike Eisenhower at the Magpie. This station also witnessed the journeys made by girlfriends visiting Engineer boyfriends and, less frequently, Engineers heading into Norwich.

WALK>> back into town along The Thoroughfare and stop at The Cap pub.



12. The Cap

The Cap was once The Cardinal's Hat, another venue popular with the USAAF, with an old skittle alley at the rear which is now a shop. Not quite the bowling alleys the Americans were used to back home, but still good for a laugh. The gap between the pub and the next building would have been Freddie's Fish and Chip shop during the war. Aware that Americans were paid far more than the locals, Freddie charged them far more. Instead of a shilling (5p) for fish and chips he charged them a full £1, and there were 20 shillings in a pound.

WALK>> continue along The Thoroughfare and stop at the Swan Hotel.

13. The Swan

The Swan was also popular with the USAAF. Like the Magpie it had a bowling green and pavilion at the back used by the servicemen. Photos show the landlord and his daughter with their American friends. It was ideal for parties and one of the staff met and then married an Italian POW she met here.



WALK>> continue along The Thoroughfare, past the Market Place, past the enormous redwood tree in the garden of Selborne House and stop at Recreation Lane.

In the yard early in the mornings, the Clubmobile, a converted single decker bus, arrived and the Red Cross prepared food the Americans loved such as burgers, hot dogs, and doughnuts. It not only had food but played music over speakers too. A local woman called Vera used to help serve food. When the war was over she was given a ride in a Flying Fortress and stayed in touch with her American friends. Awkwardly, the English and (importantly!) non-local driver of the Clubmobile, was caught stealing from the truck.

14. Selborne House

On your right is Selbourne House where General Eisenhower is supposed to have stayed. The owner at the time remembered buying 1,000 US cigarettes from the same shifty driver of the Clubmobile, mentioned above, for two shillings (10p) a hundred and selling them for 50p.

On your left, Number 2, London Road, a shop, was the home of Derek Kenyon who played in the local band with Bertie Bond, Mr Englington, and Mr Brundle, another Harleston shopkeeper. They were very popular and were known to have played here and at Thorpe Abbots, the airbase of the 100th Bomb Group.

WALK>> up Recreation Lane to the Recreation Ground.



D Day 6th June 1944

One evening there was a huge amount of activity in the sky, with many unfamiliar planes. This continued into the night and the next day. There were hundreds of gliders being towed, planes full of paratroopers, fighters,

15. The Recreation Ground

This was the scene of some light relief in the shape of entertaining baseball game demonstrations by USAAF servicemen and the Engineers from Weybread, with local children sometimes allowed to join in.

The band from the Engineers also played in September 1944 raising £22 for charity (enough to rent a fully furnished bungalow for 10 weeks).

FINISH This is the end of the Tour and we hope you found it thought-provoking as well as entertaining.



and bombers. Instead of sending up two squadrons of 12 planes from an airfield all four would be sent up, return, and then fly off again. Even the RAF was flying during daylight, as the skies were dominated by the Allied fighters, and the bombers. They were becoming Masters of the Air. This was D-Day, but it was still a long road to ultimate victory.

Changing winds of 1945

Flixton tragedy April 1945

The war, however, was never far away and people saw two B24s Liberators from Flixton appear to touch whilst over the town, and then disintegrate in mid air. 'Thousands of pieces fluttered slowly down to earth like giant autumn leaves' wrote one observer.

There were no survivors and less than four weeks later the war was over. One of the crewmen was named Fuller. He would not have known but the Fullers from Harleston were amongst the original Pilgrim Fathers aboard the Mayflower in 1620. The descendants who stayed here are buried at St Mary's churchyard, the tower of which overlooks the crash site. Perhaps it is fitting that someone who bore the same name as those that left this land in search of greater freedoms, had returned to defend them.

The Memorial is on a quiet country lane, outside Harleston which can be reached by walking along Straight Lane and then carrying on as described on the page between Trail points 9 and 10.

In another incident, six weeks after VE day, Mustangs were practicing towards Gawdy Hall on the edge of town. Four dived down towards it, but only three came up.

Victory in Europe 8th May 1945

On Tuesday 8th May, Victory in Europe was declared. In the Market Place townfolk made a bonfire of blackout boards and curtains to celebrate victory, drink, laugh and dance.

Fighting continues in the Far East

But the war was not over in the East and many locals remained as POWs of the Japanese. Some crews were sent back to the US to transfer to the frontline in the Far East and preparatory training continued in the Harleston area.

The sorrow of goodbyes

Much of the USAAF was being recalled at a speed which shocked some locals, with people who had become part of their lives, suddenly gone. Thousands of servicemen, who had become part of Harleston life, vanished. Rationing however still continued until 1954.

As Bertie Bond's daughter said "Once the USAAF left, Harleston was dead. But many corresponded with their American friends. Some emigrated, marrying their sweethearts. Others adjusted to a different life ... the siren stopped, and it was no longer 'raining planes!'."

Harleston over the centuries

Harleston Museum tells the stories of Harleston over the centuries. Visit to find out about the family who sailed on the Mayflower becoming one of the founders of America and much more.



The Museum porch is always open with a Friendly Invasion display showing contemporary photos. Please check the opening times. www.harlestonhistoricalsociety.org.uk/museum

In memory

To the many service personnel who gave their lives during World War Two.

With thanks

This Harleston Friendly Invasion Walking Tour was compiled and written by Gordon Lascelles. Many thanks to Janine Lascelles, Kate Chenneour, Gary Alderton, Harleston and District Historical Society, and many others who provided information.

This leaflet has been funded by the UK Government with a Shared Prosperity Fund Grant, administered by South Norfolk Council. Published Spring 2025.

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