

Diss

Friendly Invasion Walking Tour



Visit Diss



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South Norfolk
COUNCIL

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

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



Welcome to Diss

This enjoyable and self-guided tour in our historic market town takes about 60 minutes, taking you to locations which were significant during the Friendly Invasion. There are many inviting shops, and places to eat and drink, along the way.

Start at 1 and follow the numbers, and read more, on the following pages.

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- ① The Shambles, Diss Museum
 - ② Dolphin House
 - ③ St Mary's the Virgin Church and Memorial
 - ④ The Saracen's Head
 - ⑤ The Greyhound
 - ⑥ The Corn Hall
 - ⑦ The Old Crown Hotel and Pub
 - ⑧ Tudor House
 - ⑨ Loop trail The Board Walk
 - ⑩ Waterfront Pub
 - ⑪ The Mere
 - ⑫ Loop walk to the Beacon in the Park
 - ⑬ The Old Cinema
 - ⑭ The Market Place Fish & Chip Shop
 - ⑮ No 8 Market Place

Photos courtesy of Diss Museum and by kind permission from 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum.

1. The Shambles, Diss Museum

This delightful museum of Diss, called the Shambles, is the ideal starting point for the Friendly Invasion tour. When it's open pop in and discover that this was a popular butcher's shop in the 1940s. Please check their website for opening times.

WALK>> a few steps behind the Shambles and stop by the half timbered house on the corner of Church Street.



2. Dolphin House

One of the most beautiful houses in Diss, this 16th century building behind the Shambles is of architectural and historical interest, with its oversailing and carved timberwork on the North Gable. In its early years it was the home of a cloth merchant. During WW2 it was a pub and therefore a popular drinking venue.

WALK>> retrace your steps briefly to the Shambles, then turn right into Market Hill and walk up this road and stop in front of the church by the War Memorial.

Cooking on Rations

The locals found it hard to stretch the war time rations and recipe ideas were always useful. Here are suggestions for housewives to vary their menus, published in the local Diss Express paper in 1943.



Well fed and ready to keep watch

These are recipes from the notebook of the sergeant cooks attached to AA Command, whose job it was to see that the men on the guns and search lights, got appetising meals.

Gun Site Buns

Corned beef, dried and then soaked bread, fine chopped vegetables, pinch of sage, pepper and salt. Mix thoroughly, form into small patties, fry in very hot shallow fat.

Searchlight Savory

Prepare Suet Pastry and cut corned beef into small squares. Fry onions, carrots and turnips. Mix with the corned beef and place in oblongs of suet pastry which are then made into rolls with all edges sealed. Place rolls in scalded floured cloth and boil for two hours. Serve with thick gravy sauce.

Scolded flour is flour mixed with boiling water. Perhaps the cloth is coated in this mixture before tying up around the savouries ready for boiling like an old-fashioned pudding.

3. The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin

This was where some of the 100th Bomb Group personnel sang a haunting rendition of Handel's Messiah.

At the front of the church is the town's War Memorial, dedicated to all the war dead of both WW1 and WW2, with poppy wreaths laid every year on Remembrance Sunday. All the services personnel from overseas will have memorials dedicated to them both in East Anglia and in their home countries.

Dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, this fine church is a central landmark and is thought to be one of the largest, in a county of fine churches, and dates from the 13th century when Edward I was on the throne.



WALK>> to the Saracens Head, next door to the church.

4. The Saracens Head

Still a very popular pub, which has wonderful carvings on the corner wall next to the Church. The Saracens Head was once a hall for Weavers Guilds and also enjoyed a spell as the location of Friday stock sales. Like many pubs it used to have a bowling green.



WALK>> retrace your steps to the front of the church and turn right up St Nicholas Street until you reach the Greyhound on your right.

5. The Greyhound

This is another old and atmospheric inn which was often packed with Americans on their nights out.

Rumour has it that James I used to visit a Public House on this site in the early 1600s.

WALK>> to the imposing Corn Hall next door.

6. The Corn Hall

Built in 1854, the Corn Hall has always been a venue for corn sales, concerts, public and meetings. Additional rooms were also used for magistrate meetings, a public library and a reading room.

During wartime The Corn Hall hosted numerous live concerts, dances, celebrations and weddings.

The Hall is still used for events today and now has an Information Centre and café with meeting and exhibition rooms upstairs.



WALK>> continue along St Nicholas Street until you reach the T-junction and look across at the red brick building which was once The Crown.

7. The Old Crown

This was a popular hotel and public house during the Friendly Invasion era and today it is private property. You can still see the name in the glass over the main door.

WALK>> retrace your steps back down St Nicholas Street, bearing right, until you reach the junction of Market Hill and St Nicholas Street, and look right at the imposing grey Tudor building.

8. Tudor House

During WW2 this ancient house, amongst the oldest in Diss, overlooked crowds of personnel and locals popping in and out of the pubs in this historic quarter. Look for the carved Dragon Post with its biblical scenes.

WALK>> a little further down the right hand side of Market Hill, look right to the Council Office where you will see the metal arch linking two buildings, indicating the beginning of the Board Walk. Walk through and pause to look to your left, behind the Council building. This was the site of a look-out point.



9. Loop trail over the Mere

Behind the Town Council building there used to be a lookout post during WW2. The ARP's (Air Raid Precautions) job was to protect civilians by keeping a lookout and sounding the alarm, so people could get to shelters in time. Imagine the sentries on watch, looking out over the Mere during long and cold nights.

This is an enjoyable stroll out over the Mere taking you back into the heart of Diss at the other end.

WALK>> at the other end of the Boardwalk you can join Mere Street. Turn right and follow Mere Street until you reach the Waterfront pub.

10. The Waterfront

This is still a thriving pub, which dates back to the 17th century. In the late 1940s it was known as the Sun to the services personnel who often tried to drink it dry. It may have been the Rising Sun before it became the Sun. Mere Street is also the main 'high street' and, during the Friendly Invasion era, saw many Americans on bicycles, pedalling to their favourite pubs or, if it was late, then weaving their way back in the dark, to their base.

WALK>> continue along Mere Street until you reach the beginning of the park by the Mere and the Diss town sign.



11. The Mere's Mouth

This is the site of the Diss town sign and of the newly installed sculpture. The Mere is a natural lake covering around 5 acres. It could be a crater from a long extinct volcano, or a deep pit left behind by a glacier after the last ice age. It is incredibly deep, with a thick layer of mud and full of fish, including monster catfish. Enjoy the view across to the park with a water fountain in the middle. This spot would have witnessed many service personnel heading to the Old Cinema.

WALK>> you can either continue along Mere Street to have a look at the Old Cinema (13) building or take loop trail detour into the park by the Mere. Follow Madgetts Walk.

12. Loop trail to the Beacon in Mere Park

If you follow the path along the edge of the Mere to the left you will come to the point where you can see the beacon, part of a connecting network of beacons across Great Britain, lit on special occasions such as coronations.

WALK>> retrace your steps back to Mere Street turn right and continue.

On the way you'll see a WW2 Memorial Garden on the right hand side of the road.

When you reach the roundabout, turn left and, ahead of you across the road, you'll see

a large building which was the cinema.



13. The Old Cinema

The building is an electrical store now, but still looks very much the same, and it used to be known as The Picture House. It was very popular in the war with servicemen and locals, for watching films, or movies as the Americans would have called them. Like clockwork, they were shown twice nightly at 5.40 and 8.15 pm and matinées were Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday at 2 pm, with programmes changing twice weekly.

WALK>> return along Mere Street until you reach the Market Place, where you started, by Diss Museum.

14. The Market Place Fish and Chip shop

Fish and chips were a staple during WW2 as much as they are today, with many Americans stopping in the Market Place to order a portion. In fact, this humble meal was seen as an essential morale booster by Winston Churchill so it wasn't rationed.

It was not unusual for some chip shops to charge Americans more, as they were paid more than locals.

On the wartime chippie's menu

The reduced fishing fleet did its best to keep fishing, but unsurprisingly demand would outstrip supply from time to time. As a back up, chip shops were known to get hold of black market spam and offer their customers spam fritters and chips instead.

The business with the curved Georgian window was the place.



15. No 8 Market Place

This has been called the Market Place for over 500 years and a market still takes place every Friday as it has since 1845, including all the way through the period of the Friendly Invasion, 1943 to 1945.

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To the right of the Shambles is a large building which is now a collective of independent shops. It was once a department store and during WW2 it was a private family home with garden at the front. Next door to the left, was a another very popular pub, The Bell.

FINISH You have reached the end of your Friendly Invasion tour around the town of Diss.

Other areas of interest

We recommend a visit to 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum, with more details overleaf.

If you liked this tour you can follow similar Friendly Invasion tours in Harleston and Wymondham nearby.

We Will Remember Them

When America entered WW2 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, hundreds of thousand of young Americans, joined up to help in the fight against Hitler. Many came to Norfolk and for over two highly intense years RAF Thorpe Abbots was home to the 100th Bomb Group. Notorious for their losses and admired for their immense bravery, this Bomb Group was the inspiration for the recent series Masters of the Air.

The 100th Bomb Group

In their first mission alone, they lost three planes and thirty men. During 22 months they were credited with 8630 missions, with the terrible loss of 732 airmen and 177 aircraft. Many risked their lives daily while missing their folks back home.

The GIs brought with them chewing gum, Lucky Strike cigarettes and a new kind of music. Their irresistible exuberance left a lasting impression on the locals in the surrounding market towns and villages.

To visit the museum check for details on www.100bgmus.org.uk

If you are driving near the Museum, then it's also worth stopping at the Half Moon pub nearby in Rushall which was a favourite bolthole within walking distance of the base. It also has a memorial dedicated to the 100th Bomb Group.



827th Aviation Engineers at Weybread

This was another notable base located at Weybread, close to both Diss and Harleston. They built at speed and maintained an astonishing volume of new runway infrastructure in the area, enabling Bomb Groups to fly missions as planned.

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.



Engineers parading in 1944,
possibly Victoria Road in Diss



Diss Museum

In 2025 Diss Museum celebrates its 50th anniversary, having opened in October 1975. This was thanks to a local resident, George Moss, who gifted £1,000 in his will in 1969 for a museum to be created. After it opened in the tiny Shambles building, it has continued to share Diss' rich history with the aid of enthusiastic volunteers and trustees.

The first curator, Tim Holt-Wilson, wrote in the Diss Express at the time: "The tiny Shambles building became a place where the town was especially aware of its past. It contains old things to do with Diss; objects on shelves and under glass, snapshots of past life - things to marvel at, to rouse one's curiosity, things loaned or given to the museum to start a collection with, precious as part of the lives of the people who put them there."

In memory

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

With thanks

To Basil Abbott from Diss Museum and pictures by kind permission from 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum.

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