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Hunting for treasure in Norfolk's sandbanks

A sailing trip to The Wash provides more than the promise of a gold rush, finds **Katja Gaskell**

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It's not often that I'm up and out the door before dawn, but then it's not every day that I go hunting for buried treasure. This is not any old treasure that we're talking about, either - it's the riches of King John that were last seen in 1216.

The evil king (treacherous, lecherous and downright cruel are just some of the adjectives used to describe him) tried to cross the mudflats of **The Wash**, a tidal estuary in **Norfolk** and one of the largest in Britain, when rising waters trapped his baggage train. Swallowed by the sea, believers have been searching for the royal loot ever since.

Today it's our turn.

There are eight of us taking part in the hunt led by Henry Chamberlain, ex-marine and the founder of the Coastal Exploration Company. Established five years ago, the company offers unique seafaring expeditions into the creeks, salt marshes and open seas of the North Norfolk coast on traditional sailing boats. Henry has already given us our early-morning briefing ("sail into The Wash, find the treasure") and all that remains is to load the final few items onto the boats.



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I climb on board Salford, a proud 30ft whelker dating back to the 1950s and the last of her kind to have been built in nearby King's Lynn. Traditionally, this type of flat-bottomed work boat would have been used to collect sea snails from the ocean before loading them on trains bound for London. Sailing alongside us is My Girls, a beautiful 20ft crabbing boat that has also been given a new lease of life, and now transports visitors to discover the stories, legends and sheer natural beauty of the area. The search for King John's treasure is the company's latest adventure.

We sail out of the harbour from Wells-next-the-Sea as the early morning sky is painted with streaks of pink and orange. The boat's depth gauge reads 1.2m and then jumps almost immediately to 0.8m; the seas here are perilously shallow and scattered with **sandbanks**. Henry, along with skippers Zoe and Colin, checks the navigation app regularly, translating the blue and green splodges on the map into safe sailing channels. Nevertheless, we shudder along the top of one sandbar before gliding into the main channel.

Not long after, we're sailing across a blue-grey sea, past a row of beach huts the colour of fondant fancies. The crew hoist the terracotta-coloured canvas sails, cut the engine, and we zip along the coastline just as traditional Norfolk sailors might have done in times gone by. I'm entrusted with the helm for a short while and watch as the winter sun breaks through the clouds, bathing the coastline in a soft, ghostly light. We race past Holkham Bay, Scolt Head Island and the shipwreck on Brancaster beach. There are bumpy patches too; we run into a small squall and get tossed about on the ocean waves, spindrift soaking our faces.

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Henry points out Thornham Marsh is where smugglers once made their fortunes moving contraband cargoes of lace, champagne and brandy through the network of unmarked channels and creeks. Clients at the time included Robert Walpole, de facto first prime minister of Great Britain, and the owners of Norfolk's Holkham Estate.

Near midday we approach The Wash, a rectangular-shaped estuary that sits between Norfolk and Lincolnshire. Henry pulls out a map and indicates where he thinks we'll strike gold.

"We know that King John lost his baggage train around here," he says, pointing to an area to the south of The Wash. "But because of the perpetual ebb and flow of the tide, we think the moving channel waters would have dragged the treasure out this way."



A hearty breakfast for hungry sailors (Katja Gaskell)

Our boats sail on, bouncing past the aptly named Roaring Middle of the estuary, and towards Roger Sand, the large sandbank that Henry has marked on the map. The sea becomes a pale jade colour and seals pop up around the boat. A gull drifts on the thermals above us and we spot a rainbow in the distance. All of these, we concur, are promising signs.

We keep our eyes peeled for flashes of golden treasure as we approach the long, almond-shaped sand bank, but all we can see are a colony of seals basking in the sunshine. Henry drops anchor - we're aware we should take advantage of the low tide to start the search. Zoe has even brought along a metal detector. But we're hungry. We've been sailing since dawn and decide that successful treasure hunts can only take place on full stomachs. Henry sets up the wood burning stove and soon the smell of frying bacon and eggs mingles with the salty air.

Of course, the real prize here is The Wash itself. It's a remote and wild area of astonishing beauty

As we're eating, however, we see the waters begin to rise. Colin jumps into the shallows and wades across to Roger Sand but the tide is coming in fast - within minutes, the 500m-long stretch of sand is submerged, leaving only a patch of foam and a bob of seals that seem to float on the surface. Witnessing the speed with which the tide rushes in, it's easy to see just how King John's treasure was lost in the first place.



Norfolk's sandbanks can come and go in an instant (Katja Gaskell)

Of course, the real prize here is The Wash itself. It's a remote and wild area of astonishing beauty. The landscape of salt marshes and mudflats are some of Britain's most important winter feeding grounds for birds. Seals swim freely in the open waters or laze on sandbanks that magically appear and disappear within minutes. The shallow waters are ideal for wild swimming - although you might want to wait until temperatures rise once more - and the sandbars are the perfect place for a picnic, or even an over of cricket. And, of course, The Wash is home to buried treasure - which I'm confident we'll find next time.

Travel essentials

The **Coastal Exploration Company** runs seafaring adventures throughout the year from its base at Wells-next-the-Sea in Norfolk. The Hunting for Royal Treasure trip is a full day sail and can accommodate a maximum of eight people. It costs £980 on a private tour, regardless of numbers, and includes breakfast, lunch and plenty of hot drinks and snacks throughout the day.

England is currently on national lockdown, which means all but essential travel is banned



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