



BEST PLACES TO LIVE IN BRITAIN

8

EAST

ASPLEY GUISE, BEDFORDSHIRE NEW 33

Aspley Guise is one of those rare places able to fulfil the apparently incompatible desires of so many of us Brits: a traditional, sleepy village with fast links to the modern world. It's one mile from the M1, Luton airport is a half-hour drive to the south, and you can get to London Euston (via Bletchley) in an hour from the village station. Being in underrated Bedfordshire, Aspley has a more understated air than more ostentatious villages in neighbouring counties. The traditional Anchor pub, for example, sells "lovely, straightforward food", but is "definitely not gastro", according to one satisfied local.

Aspley has a medieval church and more than 30 listed buildings (some Tudor, most Georgian), woodland to the south, fields to the north and an infant school rated outstanding by Ofsted. There's historical intrigue, too: during the Second World War, Aspley was home to some of the code-breakers working at nearby Bletchley Park, and talk of visits from Churchill and De Gaulle persists to this day. Terraced houses can be had for less than £250,000, while large detached homes go for £800,000.

WHY WE LOVE IT A rural retreat with good connections and a touch of mystery.

BLAKENEY, NORFOLK NEW 34

For sheer gorgeousness, Blakeney, on Norfolk's bracing northern coast, is hard to beat. Imagine peeling back the curtains on a Sunday morning to gaze at vast skies and miles of unspoilt beaches, not to mention the odd basking seal. The village, with its many brick and flint cottages and outstanding primary school, sits on a hill leading down to a harbour, with views across a patchwork landscape of sand, sea, silt, salt marshes and mud flats.

A world away from the slot machines and donkey rides of Norfolk's east coast, Blakeney's tourist trade helps to support a small but genteel range of independent shops, cafes and pubs, including the 16th-century White Horse. You can buy a two-bedroom brick and flint terraced home for less than £250,000, but you're looking at £650,000-£900,000 for a family house.

WHY WE LOVE IT All your dreams of seaside living come true.

BURY ST EDMUNDS, SUFFOLK 35

This attractive market town retains its spot on the list thanks to the enduring appeal of its historic centre, good-value period homes, green spaces, good state schools and easy access to Thetford Forest and the coast. Reflecting the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of its inhabitants (many are downsizers from London), the town's cultural life is also expanding, thanks to the restored Regency period Theatre Royal, Smithe Row gallery, the Apex, for concerts and gigs, and an annual 10-day arts festival.

The most sought-after streets spread out from the ruins of the Benedictine Abbey of St Edmund and St Edmundsbury Cathedral. They're lined with Tudor, Georgian and Victorian town houses and terraces; four-bedroom homes cost between £500,000 and £800,000.

WHY WE LOVE IT Affordable, cultured and well-schooled.

EAST BERGHOLT, SUFFOLK NEW 36

Almost any of the villages in the lush, undulating countryside of the Stour



Land of the rising sun

Head towards Britain's far east for charming but commutable villages, foodie havens and a thriving cultural scene, all set against a backdrop of vast skies and unspoilt beaches

Valley could have made it onto this year's list, but East Bergholt, the birthplace of John Constable, just nudges ahead. Surrounded by fields and trees, under wide open skies, the centre of the village is dominated by St Mary's Church, built between the 14th and 16th centuries. The village retains its post office and store, a bakery and five pubs. Yet for all its rural splendour – it's a short walk to Flatford Mill, immortalised in *The Hay Wain*, Constable's most famous painting – East Bergholt is five minutes from the A12 and three miles from Manningtree station, from which trains to London Liverpool Street take about an hour.

The village has good primary and secondary schools, and there are excellent grammar schools in nearby Colchester and Braintree. If you're going private, Ipswich and Colchester are the places to look. Four-bedroom period homes go for £750,000-£1m.

WHY WE LOVE IT Constable's birthplace is still picture-perfect – and commutable.

FRAMLINGHAM, SUFFOLK NEW 37

As more and more towns morph into one another, with identikit chain stores and supermarkets, charming,

historic Framlingham stands out from the crowd. Its 12th-century castle, perched on a hill at the edge of the town, looks down regally on streets that are a higgledy-piggledy mix of timber-framed Tudor, pastel pink cottages, Regency, Georgian and Victorian. Even traffic lights have yet to come to the narrow streets. Market Hill (which is in fact more of a square) hosts a twice-weekly market selling everything from food to toys. The cafes and shops are refreshingly independent (except for a small Co-op), and the Station pub and hotel serves locally brewed beer: the superstar singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, a former resident of the town, recently sampled it with his even more stellar friend Taylor Swift.

A period home on popular Double Street, in the historic centre, will cost about £550,000, or you can get a modern four-bedroom detached house for £350,000. The town earned a mention from us for its schools last year, and they remain excellent: the Independent Framlingham College and Thomas Mills High School are still rated outstanding.

WHY WE LOVE IT Seriously characterful, with beer good enough for pop stars.

Best places for commuters

Almost everyone wants a dream family home with an easy commute to London, which is why properties in desirable towns and villages with a speedy link to the capital command a price premium. Ever wondered what happens when you compare journey times, frequency, interchanges, and affordability of housing – without worrying about an organic deli and a Waitrose? If you have a need for speed, here are the top 10 towns.



- + Barking 15 mins to Fenchurch Street – £185,000
- + Croydon 13 mins to London Bridge – £284,000
- + Luton 24 mins to St Pancras – £182,000
- + Stevenage 22 mins to King's Cross – £182,000
- + Iford 16 mins to Liverpool Street – £303,000
- + Slough 18 mins to Paddington – £226,000
- + Sidcup 18 mins to London Bridge – £235,000
- + Watford 17 mins to Euston – £275,000
- + Ebbw Vale 18 mins to St Pancras – £214,000
- + Reading 27 mins to Paddington – £227,000

Source: CommuteFrom.com



GREAT SHELFORD, CAMBRIDGESHIRE NEW 38

Great Shelford is a village where you can straddle three worlds. Although increasingly blurring into Cambridge, Great Shelford retains its country sensibility and its own station, from which you can reach London Liverpool Street in less than 90 minutes. The village has a library, two pubs, a monthly farmers' market, two bike shops (many cycle the four miles into Cambridge), a bakery, a deli, and Barker Brothers, a family butcher opened in 1883. Great Shelford's rugby club was founded in 1933 and is still going strong, while the surrounding countryside is dotted with footpaths and bridleways heading out towards the Gog Magog Hills. There's a good village primary school, and it's a short drive or cycle to Trumpington Road's many independent schools. Prices remain lower than in the heart of Cambridge proper: a 1920s semi can be had for £435,000, or a modern four-bedder for £550,000. For £1.5m, you can buy a six-bedroom manor house set in 1.8 acres – try buying one of those in the city centre.

WHY WE LOVE IT Country living lite.

NORWICH, GOLDEN TRIANGLE 39

The leafy Victorian streets that make up the Golden Triangle have stayed on our list, and with the widening of the A11 to Norwich finally due for completion this year, they will soon be more accessible. The Triangle – a wedge-shaped area west of the centre, bounded by the Newmarket, Ipswich and Unthank roads (the exact boundaries are debatable) – houses a cosmopolitan mix of wealthy professionals, young families, 21st-century hippies (the city is a stronghold for the Green party) and students, lending it a lively community atmosphere and earning it the moniker "Norfolk's Notting Hill". The neighbourhood has excellent schools, pubs and independent cafes, an art gallery, a park in the middle and another to the west. It's a short walk from the centre, with its castle, cathedral, theatres, cinema, art galleries, restaurants and shops. Two-bedroom Victorian and Edwardian terraced houses typically cost £250,000-£300,000; a detached family villa might go for more than £1.5m.

WHY WE LOVE IT There's nothing Alan Partridge about this cosmopolitan slice of Norfolk life.



#Write – one of the best places to live, with village green, duck pond and beautiful period properties! @Beesfords

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Swan around
A craft shop in Orford, far left; East Bergholt, which inspired Constable, left; and Blakeney, above

ORFORD, SUFFOLK NEW 40

Aldeburgh may be bigger, grander and closer to the sea, but Orford has more authentic rugged charm. Once a busy medieval port, the town declined in importance as the coastline silted up, creating Orford Ness, a 10-mile shingle spit that almost blocks access to the sea. The modern-day village retains a near-perfect 12th-century castle keep as a reminder of its illustrious past, and smaller boats head out to sea via the River Ore. Today, Orford attracts foodies, thanks to its award-winning village store (more a high-end deli), fishmonger, butcher, artisan bakery, smokehouse, weekly food market, restaurants, pubs and Brinkley's fish shed, on the quay. Cultural activities range from tennis and sailing to film nights at the town hall and an annual open-air jazz concert. Snape Maltings, home of the Aldeburgh music festival, is five miles away.

The village primary school is decent, but for excellent state and independent options, look to nearby Woodbridge. Local estate agents refer to "Planet Orford" because it's so hard to predict what properties will fetch. A small period cottage might start at £250,000, but will often go for £300,000. More sizeable family homes can sell for as much as £850,000.

WHY WE LOVE IT It's like Borough Market (almost) by the sea.

SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX 41

Quieter and more green-welled than other Essex towns, Saffron Walden is only 45 miles from London on the M11, yet has a clear sense of its own identity. Combining the best of old and new, town and country, this medieval town deserves to be honoured for a second year running. Its

market, first held in the 12th century, continues to this day on a square lined with Tudor and Georgian facades. It has been augmented by independent shops and eateries, as well as aspirational high-street chains. The town's literary festival is currently in full swing, there's an independent, not-for-profit cinema, and a new venue, Saffron Hall, covers theatre, music and dance.

Green spaces add to the sense of being in the country, with an 800-year-old common near the centre and Bridge End Gardens, a beautifully restored Victorian park and maze. Saffron Walden County High School is rated "outstanding"; it's 50 minutes to London Liverpool Street from Audley End station, two miles away, and a four-bedroom Victorian town house near the centre can be had for £430,000.

WHY WE LOVE IT Laid-back, cultured, refined – a million miles from Towle.

STOCK, ESSEX NEW 42

Finding somewhere within striking distance of London, but without any trace of its stresses, is the holy grail for many. This traditional village hits the spot, with cricket and fetes on the green in the summer, and four pubs to cosy up in during the winter. Stock is surrounded by fields and trees, yet this apparent isolation belies its proximity to the A12 (three miles), the M25 (eight miles) and London Liverpool Street (just over half an hour by train from nearby Billerica). Despite the pull of the capital, the village has retained a vibrant centre, with a post office and store, a new village hall, an Italian restaurant, a coffee shop – renowned for its cream teas – a wine merchant and dozens of clubs and societies. Tempted to put down roots? There's a centre for preschoolers, the village primary and the nearby Myflower secondary are both decent – or go for one of the grammar schools in nearby Chelmsford or Southend. We found four-bedroom detached homes on sale for anything between £450,000 and £800,000.

WHY WE LOVE IT Unspoilt Essex just half an hour from the City.



The vast expanse and wide open skies of Holkham Beach made me feel like I was in heaven – even when it rained! **Amanda Holden**





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