

Introduction to Wallingford's History

Welcome to Wallingford! The aim of this guide is to introduce you to the rich history of our ancient town. It will guide you through some of the main streets and more obvious points of interest but it will also seek out some of the hidden gems of the town, down back streets and alleyways, which you might otherwise miss.

You can pause the player at the end of each section and restart when you reach the next stopping place. We begin in the centre of the Market Place, near the fountain, so please walk there now.

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Wallingford has an impressive history that dates back over a thousand years and you are standing in the Market Place which has been the heart of its trading activity since Saxon times. A market is still held here every Friday. Wallingford was granted a Charter in 1155 by Henry II, because the town had helped his mother Matilda in the wars against her cousin King Stephen. The Charter gave Wallingford many trading rights and liberties exceeding even those of London. Wallingford is one of only four towns specifically mentioned in *Magna Carta* in 1215.

The **Town Hall** which still presides over the Market Place was built in 1670. It was a replacement for the old medieval Guild Hall which stood to the south of St Mary's church. The Town Hall is timber-framed, but its stucco rendering gives it the appearance of a costlier stone building. At the time when the Town Hall was built, Wallingford was quite hard up, still recovering from the devastations of the Civil War. The open area beneath the Town Hall was once used for market stalls and was where '*The Hustings*' were set up at election times for the town burgesses to make their public declaration of support for their favourite candidates. Wallingford was represented by its own two elected MPs from the 13th century until the Great Reform Act of 1832, and by one until constituency boundaries were finally changed in 1885.

The Borough courts and Quarter Sessions were held in the chamber above the Town Hall. The 18th century Judge, Sir William Blackstone, author of *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, worked here as the town's Recorder (or legal advisor). His books were widely used by the makers of the American Constitution and legal system. There's a blue plaque which commemorates him, near the steps on the west wall of the Town Hall. The steps were a 20th century addition to the Town Hall; the original entrance was through a doorway underneath it. The original 17th century door still exists behind the more modern one. Above the steps is the shield of the Borough. The portcullis motif has been the Borough insignia for over 300 years and appears on the town regalia.

Now take a look round the Market Place. You'll notice how the shape of the fine Venetian triple window on the end of the Town Hall has been mirrored in other buildings around the Market Place. Notice also the **war memorial** which was first erected in 1921 to commemorate those who fell in the First World War.

The ornate **drinking fountain** was donated in 1885 by Alderman Hawkins of *Field and Hawkins*, a prominent draper's shop which stood on the north side of the Market Place until its closure in 1980. The business began as *Fields* in 1808 in the most easterly of the modern shops. New plate glass windows were fitted to the two eastern buildings in the 1890s. The shop on the west was rebuilt after modern road widening.

Take a look at **The Corn Exchange**. Its original purpose is denoted by the stone-carved decoration over the doorway. It opened in 1856 and its roof is supported by magnificent iron beams, visible from inside. They were cast by Wilders the local iron-founders. The Corn Exchange is now used as a theatre and cinema and has featured in the well-known television series *Midsomer Murders*. Wallingford is *Causton* in the series and many of the Sinodun Players who run the Corn Exchange theatre have appeared regularly as supporting artistes in *Midsomer Murders*.

Now cross the road to look at the **Old Post Office** to the west of the Town Hall.

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The Old Post Office building stands on the site of the *Mermaid Inn* which was demolished to make way for it in 1936. Over the door is a monogram of Edward VIII, who came to the throne in January 1936 but abdicated before he was crowned king. The Wallingford Post Office was opened in the interim period and the monogram with the crown is a rare example.

Close by, behind the Town Hall, stands the **Church of St Mary-le-More** which is Wallingford's civic church. The medieval church, which once stood here was largely demolished by the Victorians, who replaced it with the present building.

The tower, however, is 17th century. It was struck by lightning in 1638 but was rebuilt in 1653, largely with reused stones from Wallingford Castle which was demolished a year earlier. Walk a few metres down the pavement to take a look at the southwest buttress of the tower. You'll find a stone about two metres up inscribed 'Will Loader 1653'. The story of the carved stone is a tale of the 17th century Civil War. Wallingford Castle was a major Royalist stronghold in the struggle of King Charles I against his Parliament. It withstood a twelve week siege in 1646 before obeying royal orders to hand the castle to Oliver Cromwell. It was almost the last in the country to surrender. In 1652 Cromwell's Council of State ordered the demolition of the ancient royal castle, so all that remains today are the still imposing earthworks on which the walls once stood. Will Loader, whose name is on the stone, was the royalist Mayor of Wallingford in 1647 until, as the Borough Statute Book records, he was '*putt out of the maioralitie of this Burrough by virtue of an Ordinance of Parliament*'. A parliamentary supporter became Mayor in his place, but he remained in the town and probably gave money towards the rebuilding of St Mary's tower in 1653. Happily, we know, that when Charles II was restored to the throne, Will Loader became Mayor again.

Now retrace your steps towards the Old Post Office and notice the building on the corner of **Church Lane**, to your left. This was once the *Eight Bells* pub and you can see the surviving hanging bracket on the corner that was formerly used

for the pub sign. This was another of the 50 or so Wallingford pubs that were in business in Victorian times to serve the population of just a little over 2,000.

You should now make your way down Church Lane (by the south side of the Old Post Office.) This lane follows the line of a narrow Saxon street, linking the Market Place to the Kinecroft and the original Saxon ramparts. Follow it as far as the junction with Goldsmith's Lane, noticing as you go examples of the wide use of brickwork as a local building material. You may wish to pause your player for a moment until you reach Goldsmith's Lane.

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At this junction with Goldsmith's Lane look to the right to see some of the old buildings of the Wallingford Brewery which once dominated the skyline with its tall chimneys and crowded the narrow streets with its horse-drawn drays. The business was run by the Wells family from its beginnings in the 18th century until it was taken over by Ushers in 1928 who kept it going into the 1950s. The vast majority of Wallingford pubs were owned by Wells and the brewery served a wide local area.

Immediately opposite you is Wallingford's former Elementary School. It was in use as a school for over a hundred years, from 1861-1968 but now it serves as the Wallingford Community Centre.

In medieval times, Goldsmiths' Lane would have been the area where the gold and silversmiths worked. The Domesday Book entry for Wallingford in 1086 mentions a licenced moneyer in the town and we know that coins were first made here in Saxon times. The moneyer would almost certainly have worked in this area, minting coins that bore his name, the king's name and head, and an indication that the coin was made in Wallingford. They had to be licenced by the king and Wallingford coins were produced from the 10th-13th centuries.

Now cross the road carefully and walk towards the grassy area known as the Kinecroft. As you go you will pass a row of old cottages on your left. In the 19th century most of these were owned by Wells Brewery and were used to house the families of some of the brewery workers. Continue the commentary when you reach the open space.

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This is **The Kinecroft**, an open space which is enclosed on two sides by the town's Saxon ramparts. For centuries people believed that Wallingford was a Roman town, partly because of the rectangular shape of the old town defences and the grid-like pattern of its streets, but actually Wallingford is a *Saxon* fortified town, or *burh* as it is known - in fact, it is the best surviving example in England. The earthwork ramparts you see around you were built in the late 9th century by order of King Alfred as part of a network of defences constructed to protect his Kingdom of Wessex against Danish attack. Wallingford was one of the two largest of these fortified *burhs*, equal in size to Winchester, which was then Alfred's capital. By the 11th century Wallingford had developed as the leading town of Berkshire.

For more than five centuries the Kinecroft (meaning place for cattle) was grazing land for cattle belonging to the burgesses but archaeology has revealed that the line of Church Lane (down which you walked) once extended right into and across the Kinecroft. Beams slots and post holes of early medieval wooden houses were discovered alongside it. The properties lay at right-angles to the track. The finds from the archaeology show that the properties were in use from the 11th to 13th centuries but after that they disappear. This isn't surprising because we know Wallingford shrank in size when it fell on hard economic times around the end of the 13th century and the Black Death would have caused a further big drop in population in the 14th century. It was not till the late 17th century that things gradually began to improve again, particularly as the vast growth of London opened up new trading opportunities by river.

Now turn to your right and walk across the Kinecroft until you reach the far north-eastern corner and the High Street. You are heading towards the flint-clad building on the opposite side of the High Street, but pause before you cross the road.

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Immediately to your right as you face the High Street is the imposing *Wallingford House*, which was once the private residence of Edward Wells the brewer. There were actually six generations of Edward Wells, so researching their history can be somewhat confusing! To your left, near the present mini-roundabout, was the site of the town's west gateway, which stood where the High Street cuts through the Saxon ramparts. Outside the west gate was the traditional place for the settling of disputes by means of a 'Love Day' - an official agreement for an old-fashioned punch-up!

Opposite you is the fine gabled property know today as **Flint House**, which is the home of **Wallingford Museum**. (The eastern end of the property, Flint Cottage, is privately owned)

This intriguing building once belonged to the Priory of Holy Trinity, a cell of St Alban's Abbey. In medieval times you would have been looking across to the imposing Priory Church with its extensive monastic buildings. Holy Trinity was one of Wallingford's 11 medieval parish churches, most of which are now lost. It served both the parishioners and the Benedictine monks of the Priory but was dissolved in Henry VIII's reign by Cardinal Wolsey who used the money towards building his New College in Oxford - Christ Church.

The flint-work hides a fine oak-framed house with traces of an earlier stone base on the right-hand end. The building was known as Stone Hall in the 16th century. This eastern end, is the oldest surviving part, dating to the 15th century, but a hall was soon added to the west, together with the wing, which now house Wallingford Museum. An upper floor was inserted in the central open hall - probably in the 17th century- and the earlier gable ends can be traced in the stonework. Timber framing is visible inside.

Cross the High Street with care and if the museum is open go into the reception area. There you will be able to see reconstruction drawings of both the Priory and Wallingford Castle and if you have time in hand, you might like to pause for a

while to explore the museum further, or at least to pick up leaflets with information about the museum and other things to visit locally.

If, unfortunately, the museum is closed, you can find the opening hours displayed in the window.

When you are ready, cross back to the Kinecroft again to continue your walk.

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Make your way back to a place near the pub in the centre of the Kinecroft. The brickwork on this building is characteristic of many Wallingford structures. The vitrified *headers* - the short bricks as distinct from the long ones which are called *stretchers* - have been fired longer to give them a distinctive blue colour. They are used on many buildings to create a patterning effect. Another example can be seen close by on the wall of the old school which you passed earlier.

Now take the path which runs diagonally across the Kinecroft to the far south-west corner where there is a ramp or a few steps, and then follow the path left along the top of the ramparts in an easterly direction. After a few yards pause to observe the deep ditch which is falling away to your right.

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You are now standing on top of Wallingford's Saxon earthen ramparts, which would once have been capped by a wooden palisade. The outer ditch you can see enclosed the town on three sides, with the river on the east - nearly two miles of defences in all. Over time the original water-filled ditch has been largely filled in and in modern times the water flow has been diverted or piped underground. The banks have been eroded to about two-thirds of their original height but the ditch gives at least some sense of the scale of these fortifications. Note how you are standing at roof-top level with the outer ditch below you. A 5th-7th century pagan Saxon cemetery was found outside the ramparts near here, so we know there was a Saxon settlement here long before the building of the 9th century *burh*.

As you now continue to follow the path along the ramparts note the pretty row of brick cottages on your left known as Beansheaf Terrace. As you reach the end of the terrace, you will be able to glimpse behind the houses the old Wilder's iron foundry. It was built in 1869 and has fine iron-cast windows. The foundry bell used to call the workers in every morning. The building has now been tastefully converted into flats. Beneath the old foundry and new houses lies one of Wallingford's many lost churches. It was known as St Rumbold's, or St Ruald's, named after an 8th century Mercian saint, and it was one of Wallingford's earliest churches. The churchyard was excavated in an archaeological dig in 1982. As you reach Mill Lane, which comes in on the left, the building to the right with an attractive courtyard is the site of the original Wilder's iron foundry, forerunner of the one you have just passed. Surviving descriptions of this early 19th century foundry tell of a horse wheel in the courtyard, used to power the great bellows which were set into the foundry wall and kept its fire hot. As you walk on down the lane towards the main road, note the high level door for off-loading goods from carts, and the iron protectors at ground level to avoid cart-wheel damage. Take care here, as traffic does occasionally use this narrow lane!

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At the junction of Mill lane and St Mary's Street an old mill building faces you. There was a water-mill on this site from the 12th to the 20th century. Its water power came from the town moat and from a spring beneath the mill. It is described in medieval documents as the '*mill at the south gate*' and it belonged to the castle. In the 14th century it was called 'Prince's Mill', after Edward the Black Prince who held Wallingford Castle as his principle residence.

Turn right now and cross over St John's Road to reach St John's Green. As you walk, note the portcullis insignia of the borough carved on the window brackets of the old foundry, denoting that the building was owned by the Borough. Notice also that you are crossing over the Saxon defensive ditch.

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From St John's Green, look back to the old foundry building, where you'll see a fine weather-vane of a man with a plough. It was appropriate for the Wilders iron-foundry where making agricultural machinery was a speciality!

St John's Green, and the houses round it, are on the site of the medieval Hospital of St John, which was in existence by the 13th century and was endowed by Simon de Montfort and many townspeople. It was run by monks and nuns and served the town. It also had charge of a leper hospital in Crowmarsh, across the river from Wallingford. The tree in the centre of the Green has replaced an oak which was planted in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

Opposite are the Almshouses, built in 1681 and still in use. They were endowed by a local ironmonger called William Angier and his sister Mary. Cross the road to have a closer look at the plaque above the door. The windows of the building were altered in the 19th century.

If you are an Agatha Christie fan and you are feeling energetic, you might like to take a detour at this point. Some 250 yards further down the road going out of the town, after passing the hospital on your right, you will eventually come to a house quite close to the road, but with a large hedge and a garden gate and a Blue Plaque next to the front door. This is Winterbrook House, home to Agatha Christie and her second husband Sir Max Mallowan for over forty years. They owned other properties too but spent a lot of time here in Wallingford particularly in the latter years of life. Many of Agatha Christie's later books were written here and this is where she died in 1976. She is buried, with Sir Max, in the churchyard at Cholsey, the neighbouring village to Wallingford.

To continue the main walk, turn back towards the town. Next to the almshouses is one of the town's early 20th century garages, now used as an office. It was built by Wilders to house their new motor car and cycle department. You can see where the petrol pumps were sited round the side of the building in Lower Wharf. Turn into Lower Wharf and as you walk down it notice how the buildings to your left are at a higher level. This is because they are built on top of the Saxon rampart and the defensive ditch, still with a little running water, divides you from them. Continue down Lower Wharf until you reach the old malt house building on the right.

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Malting is the process by which barley grains are germinated and then swiftly dried in hot air. This process releases enzymes, making the grains soluble and therefore suitable for use in beer-making. Malting was a very important local industry in Wallingford from medieval to modern times. This 17th century malt-house with its original wooden windows was one of at least seventeen in the town. The wet grain was laid out to dry on the malthouse floor and turned frequently with malt shovels to prevent the new roots from matting together. This malthouse is built of hard chalk, known locally as *clunch*, set on a flint and brick plinth. It is part of the outbuildings of a fine 16th century house, which lies hidden behind a laurel hedge, fronting the river. If you walk to the end of the road you will see the river. This area was once Wallingford's *Lower Wharf* from which barge traffic plied the Thames, transporting goods to and from London. It may have been a wharf since early Saxon times.

Retrace your steps a few yards and continue the walk by taking the small passageway through the houses on the right and crossing back over the town ditch into the town. Notice the iron railings along the path, which were cast by Wilders and bear their name on the plinth after the third brick pier and in similar places elsewhere. Also look for late Saxon-work in the south wall of the chancel of St Leonard's church as you pass by. Features include a small window and what appears to be a blocked in doorway.

Follow the path to the road where you can view the north wall of the church at the front.

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St Leonard's Church, which had an earlier dedication to Holy Trinity, is the oldest of the town's three surviving parish churches. High on the north wall you can see the herring-bone pattern of 11th century stonework interspersed with blocked up early windows. The church suffered severe damage by fire during the 17th century Civil War and was not in full use again until repairs were made in the early 18th century. In 1850 it was heavily restored and the tower added.

On the pavement outside the church, notice the iron kerb, more work from the local Wilder iron foundry. The kerb protected the pavement from damage by iron-rimmed cart wheels. There are several surviving examples in the town.

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Our walk now takes us along the length of Thames Street, which begins with its large Victorian river-fronting properties on the right and other, somewhat earlier houses on the left. You will pass 'Riverside' on your right which has a plaque to the Victorian artist George Dunlop Leslie RA who lived there. Another important family of Victorian artists, the Hayllars, lived close by in Castle Priory which lies behind the imposing gates in the distance ahead. James Hayllar had a family of talented daughters whom he taught to paint. It was still quite unusual for women to be professional artists and examples of their work were exhibited at the Royal Academy. In the 18th century, Castle Priory had been the home of Judge William Blackstone, who was mentioned earlier.

Under the car-park and the house on the corner of New Road on the left lie the remains of St Michael's church and churchyard, another of Wallingford's lost parish churches. 35 burials and a bell-pit were excavated in the garden of the house in 1974. In the late 19th century the car-park area was a cattle-market. The present Rowing Club, on the right as you approach the gates of Castle Priory, was another malt-house, with a distinctive vent on the roof.

Opposite the malthouse, by the gate into the car-park, is an iron vent pipe, one of several survivors from the prestigious, hydro-pneumatic sewerage system installed in the town in 1891. As you continue to walk along Thames Street, the spire of St Peter's church will come into view. The medieval church of St Peter was destroyed during the Civil War but it was rebuilt in 1769, with the addition of a spire designed by Robert Taylor in 1777.

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Opposite the entrance to St Peter's is Wallingford Baptist Church, founded in 1794 by Robert Lovegrove, who was a local solicitor. He built the chapel in the garden of his home, Calleva House, a large brick-built building which fronts the High Street. The chapel has been in continuous use since then. Continue walking to reach the junction with the High Street. Ahead, on the other side of the High Street is the imposing Victorian private carriage entrance to the Castle grounds. Cross the High Street and turn right to walk out across the bridge as far as the recess about half way across.

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The bridge is first recorded in 1141 but the earlier ford was almost certainly close to where the bridge now stands. This was the place where, in 1066, William the Conqueror and his army crossed the River Thames. They had won the Battle of Hastings but failed to take London so they came instead to Wallingford, a major Saxon royal centre. Here, Wigod, the Saxon lord of Wallingford, accepted William. The new king ordered the building of Wallingford Castle which became the most prominent royal stronghold in central southern England. Looking back towards the town, on the right hand side you can see the castle site. Its tree-covered Norman motte lies behind the town wharf and Castle Mansions, the Georgian-style block of luxury apartments built in 1999. Further up river is *Queen's Arbour*, the meadows which were once part of the outer castle defences.

The castle played a major role in the 12th century civil war between Stephen and Matilda and during the medieval period was frequently visited and lived in by members of the royal family, including King John, his younger son Richard Earl of Cornwall, the brother of Henry III, Edward the Black Prince and his wife Joan, Henry V's widow, Catherine of Valois and her young son Henry VI. Catherine's liaison with Owen Tudor the child's guardian at Wallingford led to the Tudor line of kings. The castle's demolition after the 17th century Civil War has already been described but it was still a Crown possession until 1817.

The central arches of the bridge were rebuilt after the great flood of 1809 and the whole bridge was widened by seven feet. The medieval arches are still visible under the bridge. You can access the riverside to see them via the steep steps from the bridge if you have time to take a short break. The bridge is 250m

[800ft] long and has multiple arches. Two Town Councillors are still annually appointed as *Bridgemen*. In the past their role was to oversee the *Bridge Estate*, which owned properties in the town, the rents from which helped to pay maintenance costs for the upkeep of the bridge. A 1571 charter, issued by Elizabeth I, allowed tolls to be charged on transport passing both over and under the bridge. The tollhouse, in the remains of which you are currently standing, was demolished in the 1930s. From the riverside you can see the blocked window of the lower floor of the tollhouse which projects out from the bridge. The road was originally gated here to stop carts and other vehicles to collect the tolls.

As you retrace your steps towards the High Street and the junction with Thames Street, note the 19th century iron lamp-posts on the bridge. They were cast by Wilder's, with new lanterns added in 1981.

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Just beyond the junction with Thames Street, you will pass on your left the front of the fine brick-built Calleva House. It dates to around 1760. Further along on the same side are Nos 17, 18 and 19 with steps at the front. These began as a row of 14th century houses, each with a semi-basement and a raised ground floor shop. The vaulted stone basement of No 18 survives. They were rebuilt as a single timber-framed jettied house, which in 1647 was the home of the Mayor, Will Loader who was mentioned earlier. The house was subsequently divided again into three. On the north side of the High Street is *The George Hotel*, Wallingford's oldest inn, with records dating from 1517 when it was the *George and Dragon*. Notice the fine jettied timber-work and typical courtyard. The Lamb Arcade on the corner of High Street has a Georgian façade hiding the Tudor timber-framed structure of the former *King's Hedd inn* as it was known in 1548. The timber-work is prominent inside the building and can also be seen around the corner on the Castle Street side. You now need to cross the High Street to reach the pedestrian precinct of St Mary's Street.

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The lost church of *St Mary of the Stalles* (or *the Less*), stood in this street which was originally part of the medieval market area. Several good Victorian shop-fronts survive here and also, on the left, a Tudor gabled house, that was the *White Hart Inn* in the 17th century. Note the moulded pendants at the base of the gables and the Tudor roses in the spandrels. A 16th century doorway has a carved Tudor rose in one spandrel and a blank shield in the other. Behind the door a passage leads to the rear of the property. As you emerge from St Mary's Street back into the Market Place, the present Catholic Church is set back from the street on your left. The building in which it is housed began life in 1799 as an Independent Chapel. Continue down St Mary's Street, passing the church on your right. On the corner of Hart Street is a splendid timber-framed building, which was formerly the *King's Arms*. To the right is a row of restored timber-framed shops. Further along on your left, look up to spot the former Primitive Methodist chapel, built in 1889. On the opposite side of the street is a small arcade, the entrance of which used to be the way into the Victorian Police Station. Its plastered ceiling still survives. Next comes Pettit's shop with its imposing Victorian shop front. It began business in 1856.

St Mary's Street leads into St Leonard's Square which marks the far end of the medieval Market Place. Today the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel and former Free Library (1871) hold sway, tastefully linked in recent times. Cross the square to return to the Market Place along St Martin's Street. Archaeology under new properties on the left side of this street, formerly a cinema forecourt, revealed an 11th century workshop lying at right angles to the road so this was certainly one of the town's Saxon streets. It takes its name from a lost 10th century church that once stood at its junction with the High Street, where now Waitrose dominates. The ancient churchyard lies beneath the store and some 200 medieval and 20 Saxon skeletons were excavated during its construction.

You are now back at the Market Place where you began and we hope you have enjoyed your walk. If you would like to organise a group walk to follow a similar route, or to visit the castle site, this can be arranged by contacting Wallingford Museum, who provided the information for this walk. We hope you will continue to enjoy your visit to Wallingford.

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