

A trail around Swaffham



Revised
2022

Introducing Swaffham

Swaffham has been inhabited since the Stone Age and many of its earliest story is only now beginning to be unravelled.. A strong Bronze Age connection is emerging and a pagan Saxon cemetery was unearthed some 50 years ago. The name comes most probably from the Swaefas tribe who roamed northern Europe and then came to Eastern England after the Romans left and settled here as farmers. At Domesday there were fewer than 100 villagers and many sheep. But it became part of the Honour of Richmond under Count Alan Rufus which probably caused both its status and wealth to increase. The market dates from before 1215 and the days of King John but neither church nor market is mentioned in Domesday. The buildings, apart from the church and a few buildings, is essentially Georgian and the heyday of the town in the late 18th century when it became the playground of the local and no so local gentry. It declined in 19th century with the arrival of the railway and because of the lack of both easily obtained fresh water and a good drainage system. It lost a third of its population between 1871 and 1920s to migration and emigration. It revived after World War II, reaching its 1851 population in 1961 and has thrived ever since.

Directions – We start the walk in the centre of the Market Place.

1. Market Place

There has been a market since before the time of King John. Two fairs were granted to the town by Henry II (1154 – 1189) and the Saturday Market has continued to this day.

2. Buttercross

The Earl of Orford, grandson of Robert Walpole, Prime Minister, gave the Buttercross to the town in 1783. The statue is Ceres, the Roman Goddess of corn and agriculture. So called because Swaffham became the collecting point for Cambridge butter it replaced an Elizabethan one to the north of the marketplace.

Directions – From the Market Place, cross the road to the Red Lion public house

3. Montpelier House

Built before 1785 it may be possibly have been lodgings for Fanny Nelson when staying in town. The Nelson family had strong connections with Swaffham and nearby villages.

4. Greyhound Inn

Although not a coaching inn, The Greyhound stabled up to 140 horses during the hare coursing seasons and was the centre for the Swaffham Coursing Club, the first established in England, in 1776. Hence a change of name from The Blue Bell of 1775 to The Greyhound.

5. Town Pit

The car park around the post box, now named Richmond Plain, was once the Town Pit. Used for watering animals and people, it was filled in during the 1970s. Swaffham has no fresh water and until the late 19th century residents drew water from public and private pits and wells.

Directions – Turn left down the Pightle passing the library on the right.

6. Methodist Church

Built in 1813 at a cost of £950, this community has provided three Members of Parliament in 40 years; namely Taylor , Due and Hilton.

7. The Pightle

A Pightle is a narrow path, possibly deriving from the throw of a pike or spear. There is a date stone in the right hand wall – Robert Goodrick 1775. The Goodrick family owned a brickyard the length of this stretch. A staunch Methodist family the first Methodist meetings were held in or near his home and John Wesley preached from either Westgate House, where the Goodricks lived at one time, or a cottage along the Pightle.

Directions – Continue to the end of the Pightle.

8. National School

At the end, on the left, is the National School built in 1838. The boys were taught on the ground floor and the girls upstairs until they moved to the school on Whitecross Road.

9. Campingland

The Rector of Swaffham, Dr. John Botewright, donated the piece of land facing you to the town in 1474. It was to be used for games, military drill and "other honest" games. The name derives from Camp, a rather noisy and dangerous game of football, but more like uncontrolled rugby.

In 2022 it was the focus of a small archaeological dig, funded by Historic England, to celebrate the centenary of Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Directions – Turn right and walk along the Campingland to Whitecross Road.

10. Swaffham Community Centre

On the left, the 1960's building stands close to the site of Hamond's Free School (1736).

It received an award from the Campaign for the protection of Rural England for its sympathetic design.

11. The Shirehall

Continue past the Surgery. On your right is the Shire Hall, an impressive building built in 1839.

Quarter and Petty Sessions were held here until the early 20th century. It was also the site of the first Police Station. It has now been converted to flats.

Directions – Turn right and walk past the school towards London Street

12. Swaffham Infant School

Built in 1871 originally for infants. There was an extension in 1899 and in 1901 the original building became the girls' school and the extension the infants' school. When the secondary modern school was built in 1955 the building reverted to the Infant School. It is now a Junior School.

13. Baptists' Grave Yard

On your left, you will see a small plot of land, which was the Baptists' Grave Yard. The original Baptist Chapel here was demolished in 1859 and rebuilt in Station Street.

Directions – At London Street turn right and walk back into town.

14. The QD Store

The original building is believed to be the home of the Revd. Edmund Nelson between 1750 and 1753. Three children were baptised here including a son Horatio who died as a baby.

On the wall you can see a stone carving of a person. This corbel is said to mark the spot where the Great Fire of 1775 stopped. It had started behind the White Hart in a blacksmith's shop and destroyed 24 houses. From 1890 until 2018 it was Swaffham Co-operative Society store.

15. The Town Hall

Once the home of John Morse the brewer, it became the home of Swaffham Urban District Council in 1955 and subsequently Swaffham Town Council in 1974. Swaffham Heritage has been housed in the building since its foundation in 1987.

Directions – Cross the small road with care.

16. Pedlars Café and John's Mr Chips

Pedlar's Cafe was Walker's Temperance Hotel in the 19th century. The studwork is modern and hides a brick and flint construction.

17. Plowright Place

The Plowright family manufactured agricultural implements for all over the East of England. For more than 200 years they had iron works and foundries on this site. One of Plowright's ploughs is exhibited in the courtyard.

18. The Old School

The Free School began on The Campingland with an endowment from Nicholas Hamond in 1736. It moved to this site, formerly Day's Bank, in 1895. The plaque was removed from the Campingland building.

19. Oakleigh House

Just might have been the home of John Chapman, the Pedlar of Swaffham who was churchwarden in 1458 and donated money to build the north aisle in the church after following a dream. More recently it featured as the solicitor's office in the TV production "Kingdom".

Directions – Continue on footpath.

20. Settlement Stone

On your left just before Royal Mail you will find a misshapen stone known as the settlement stone. You may find it interesting to read the information that is there.

Directions – Cross the road at the modern Post Office on your left.

The water works, foundry and gas works with another pit were all once in this area.

21. Horse & Groom

Opposite is the Horse and Groom, formerly the Black Bull and the Black Horse, it was associated with the horse sales that used to take place in the street. Bull's Yard behind it was the most notorious lodging house in the town in the 19th century with 2 toilets for 100 residents.

22. The old Post Office

This building with an unusual conical tower was the third Post Office in the town.

Directions – Take the lane on the left opposite the Town Pedlar sign and continue to the end

23. Ash Close

Ash Close is where many of the gentry would congregate for entertainment in the late 18th century. Here was the cockpit, a theatre led from here to Lynn Street, there were billiards and bowls. Strattons was the home of Chancellor Yonge, the vicar of Swaffham, whose family was not only related to Joshua Reynolds but also to the Nelson family. It was once a gated lane.

Directions – At the top of Ash Close turn right and at the main road turn left on to Station Street

24. Baptist Chapel

On your left is the Baptist Chapel which was built in 1859 and extended in 1880 and again in 1884.

25. Catholic Church

Opposite is the Catholic church. The Catholic Mission arrived in Swaffham in 1913. Their first church in modern times was on Theatre Street and they bought property on Mangate Street for a convent and a school. This church was built around 1958.

Directions – Continue down Station Street passing the Station public house on the left. Turn left before the ambulance station and walk through the car park.

26. Swaffham Railway station

Built in 1849 the station was an extremely important feature of the town until closed by Beeching in the 1960s. The front offices remain and are now the Merle Boddy Centre.

Directions – Return to the main road and cross over with care. Walk back to the traffic lights. Turn left and walk down Mangate Street.

27. Town Pound

Across the road is a flint wall – the remains of a larger Town Pound. From at least the 15th to the 19th century Swaffham had a pinder whose responsibility was to pen any straying animals. Owners were then charged for their retrieval.

28. Manor Farm

On the left is Manor Farm with buildings dating from 1730. Note the magnificent cedar tree in the garden, reputed to have been there for the past 300 years.

29. Manor House and Keeper's Cottage

Cross the small road to catch a glimpse of the Manor, home of members of the Hamond family for many generations. If time allows, walk down the side of the Manor House to a small cottage on the corner. This is Keeper's Cottage where the artist Samuel John Carter, father of Howard Carter, the Egyptologist of Tutankhamun fame, lived as a child. A separate Carter Houses trail takes you on a tour of the houses relating to the Carter family

Directions – Return to and cross the main road. Walk up the steps facing you.

30. The Antinghams

This may be a possible site of an ancient settlement and has never been cultivated. The avenue was originally bordered by walnut trees.

Directions – Turn right through the kissing gate, which leads you into the churchyard.

31. Parish Church of St. Peter and St. Paul

The church requires a separate visit and there are leaflets available which will ensure your enjoyment and appreciation of the building. Mention must be made here of the beautiful double hammer beam roof with over 200 carved angels, as well as The Pedlar's window and pews.

32. Verger's Cottage

The flint cottage in the north part of the churchyard was originally a Guild House of the church. It became a school after the suppression of the Guilds and also the home of the parish clerk. At one time in the churchyard were a tithe barn, the old Rectory, the old Vicarage and an Elizabethan workhouse. One of these building was to become an infant school in the 19th century.

33. White Lodge

This building in the churchyard was never associated with the church. It dates from before 1690 and has seen many owners and uses. For much of the 19th century it was a girls' academy

Directions – Continue past the church towards the market place. Cross the main road.

34. Corn Hall

The original site of the Market Hall. It was built as a Corn Exchange in 1858 when the market itself was beginning to flounder after the railway was built in 1847. It was not successful and has served a variety of uses since then,

Directions – Walk through the narrow alley between the shops.

35. The Shambles

This area was originally the market place and home to the many shops and stalls including the butchery. The buildings were cleared in the 1940s. Now cars have taken over, it seems. Beneath the surface were the medieval the town drain and the town well.

Directions – Turn left and walk down another alley, to bring you back to the Market Place.

36. The Assembly Rooms

Built in 1776-78 it was a very popular venue for Hunt Balls and other social occasions. Originally it faced west and a new south facing front erected in 1817. During the Second World War it was used as a NAAFI. Later the boys from Hamond's School had their meals here. It is still a popular meeting place today.

