

HIDDEN HISTORIES

TOUR OF

DORCHESTER

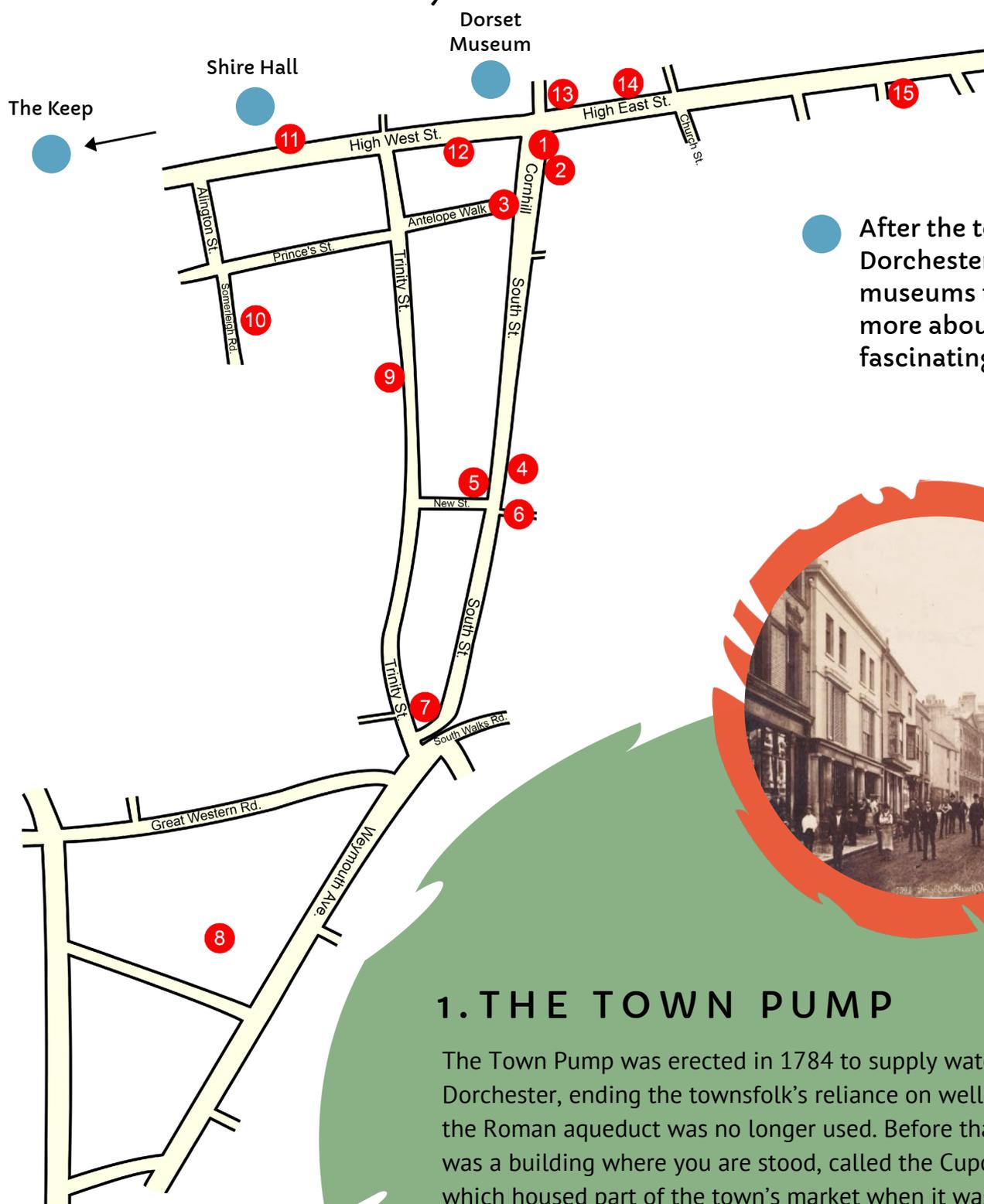


DORCHESTER

The Heart of Dorset

Discover the stories behind some of Dorchester most interesting buildings as you follow the circular town centre route starting at and returning to the town pump.

This tour has been created by final year history students Georgina, Sam, Cameron and Harry from Bournemouth University during lock down in 2021 working with the Town Council and Dorset History Centre.



● After the tour visit Dorchester's three museums to find out more about the towns fascinating history



1. THE TOWN PUMP

The Town Pump was erected in 1784 to supply water to Dorchester, ending the townsfolk's reliance on wells after the Roman aqueduct was no longer used. Before that, there was a building where you are stood, called the Cupola, which housed part of the town's market when it was held in the streets, but it was demolished in 1783 after it fell into disrepair.

To move to our next stop, turn away from the Town Pump and face the building to your left with the ornamental white shopfront.

2. PARSONS



Parsons of Dorchester was a tobacconist and grocers which remained a mainstay of Dorchester town centre for a large portion of the 20th Century. The building itself was originally bought by Walter Charles Leonard Parsons in 1936 in order to expand the family businesses further, namely hairdressing, tobacco products and groceries, from the two existing locations in the town. The building here on Cornhill was altered in 1937 to add a ladies' and gentlemen's hairdressers, before further extending in 1960-61. Parsons himself led a life which included several interesting events, including visiting Germany to attend the World Congress of Hairdressers in Cologne in 1938, making him one of the first Englishmen to visit the country after the Munich Crisis which saw Nazi Germany annex parts of Czechoslovakia. Documents highlighting his experiences can be found at the Dorchester Archives.

Continue down Cornhill, until you reach Antelope Walk on your right-hand side.

3. ANTELOPE HOTEL & OAK TEAROOMS



One notable location in Antelope Walk is the Oak Tea Rooms, dating back to the late 16th Century and was used by Judge Jeffreys, dubbed "The Hanging Judge," as the courtroom of the 1685 Bloody Assizes – a series of trials following the failed Monmouth Rebellion in England.

As King Charles II grew old, Britain divided in its support for who should succeed him. The next in line was Charles' brother James, the Duke of York, but he was a Catholic in a Protestant-dominated nation. So, some turned to Charles' illegitimate but Protestant son, the Duke of Monmouth. On 6th February 1685, Charles II died, and the Duke of York was crowned King James II. Just four months later the Duke of Monmouth sailed into Lyme Regis, intent on taking the throne for himself, ending in the last pitched battle on English soil, the Battle of Sedgemoor, which saw the Duke of Monmouth defeated, and swift reprisals.

Judge Jeffreys was dispatched with orders to try anyone connected to the rebellion and show no mercy. During the proceedings within the Antelope's Oak Tea Rooms, Judge Jeffreys heard some 302 cases, sentencing 251 of the rebels to be executed, though only 74 were to be carried out, with a large portion of the rest being transported to the West Indies. Later, you will visit the building in which Judge Jeffreys stayed during his time in Dorchester and hear more about what happened to the unfortunate rebels he found guilty.

The rest of Antelope Walk itself also dates back far into history. Originally built as lodgings for travellers in the 16th Century, it continued to be used into the late 1980s when it was transformed into a retail hub.

*Continue down Cornhill and onwards through South Street. To your left will be Barclays Bank. This building is known as being the mayor's house in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Carry on until you reach the building now inhabited by Superdrug.*

4. THURMANS

W.H.C. Thurman established an ironmongery business here at 17 South Street, where Superdrug now stands, in 1884, a trade which he had learned from his father, who owned an Ironmongers in Weymouth. Thurman ran the ironmongery until his death in 1898, when his business was bought by W.R. Skyrme, who then bought another ironmongery 64 High West Street, next to the county museum, in 1921. He turned it into the second branch of Thurmans, which was well known for the small agricultural museum kept in its basement. By 1931, the South Street location was demolished to create a larger, more modern building which could better accommodate the business. The building was a prime example of Art Deco architecture, with tall, ornate columns and floor-to-ceiling windows. Both buildings were owned by Skyrme until the 1960s. The South Street location was demolished shortly after.

For our next stop, walk to the corner where South Street meets New Street, and face the last building on the right.



6. NAPPERS MITE

When the Great Fire of Dorchester in 1613 destroyed all but five houses in the town, some believed it had been sent by God himself to punish the people of Dorchester for their uncharitable ways. In an act of repentance, they built alms-houses such as these to support the needy. Nappers Mite was constructed by Sir Robert Napper of Middlemarsh in 1615. Designed as 10 single-story dwellings surrounding an inner courtyard, the main purpose was to provide a home for men who were unable to support themselves, such as the poor, disabled, and elderly. Other rooms were used to provide services such as bible instruction to those who resided there.

The frontage of the building was entirely rebuilt in 1842, and since then all of the buildings contained within, as well as the centrepiece courtyard, have been converted into a shopping arcade containing a wide variety of businesses providing for the local community, as well as visitors.

Turn to your right and walk to the end of South Street, where it meets with South Walks Road, until you are facing Coffee #1.



5. POST OFFICE

This building belonged for many decades to the Shorto family, who ran a bakery on High West Street.

The Post Office constructed here in 1906 replaced an older branch closer to the Antelope Hotel. Locals were shocked when, in 1915, it began to employ women to fill a shortage of male employees due to the First World War. Many protested in local newspapers after a woman, the daughter of a local sergeant major, was made the head postal worker in 1916. Women all over the country took up roles in the Post Office and the number employed by the organisation rocketed from 2,000 in 1914 to 35,000 in 1918. Whilst many women relinquished these positions when men returned from war, employment numbers never dropped below pre-war levels again.

A plaque honouring the 11 workers who never returned hangs in the doorway of the new Post Office on Trinity Street. It was made by Thomas Hardy, who was a skilled draughtsman and qualified architect as well as an author. Below is placed a similar memorial to the three workers lost in the Second World War.

Turn around and face the building with the clock in the centre.

7. COFFEE NUMBER ONE

As early as 1618 this area of South Street was occupied by a workhouse, housing 50 children who were poor, orphaned, or abandoned. It was rebuilt in 1745 and began taking in adults who were unable to support themselves, such as the elderly and the disabled, as well as social unmarried mothers. It closed in 1837 when the larger Poor Law Union Workhouse opened near. Thomas Hardy explored the terrible conditions in the workhouses in his novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*; with one character dying in the Poor Law Union Workhouse.

Towards the turn of the century, the corner site was occupied by Knight's Carriage Works, one of the largest producers in the south of the country. Alfred Knight had a royal warrant, and his carriages were sold all over the world. His specialty was the Alington Cab, which he invented and patented, the design of which made travel easier and safer for customer and driver alike. Knight was a trailblazer in his field and pioneered the use of rubber tyres and electric lights in his carriages.

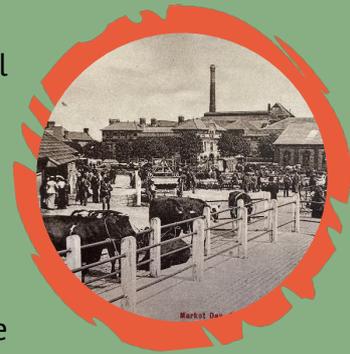
Facing Coffee No.1, walk to your left and cross the road, so you are facing Bowling Alley Walk. Continue left and cross Great Western Road then walk up Weymouth Avenue, turning right at the entrance to the market.

8. FAIRFIELD MARKET

There are records of a regular market being held in Dorchester from as early as the 4th Century, coming to prominence in the 1300s when it was granted its first royal market charter. The market used to take place on Cornhill but began moving to Fairfield in the 1850s. For hundreds of years, the market focused on the sale of livestock, particularly sheep - which is no surprise as in the early 1700s, there were over 800,000 sheep within six miles of the town! Up until the 1950s, markets were held on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Nowadays, it's just on Wednesdays.

As the area's name would suggest, it has also hosted fairs and festivities, including the Great May Sheep Fair, which once saw 18,000 sheep brought to the town! A large celebration was held here in 1911 for King George V's coronation, with an entire ox spit roasted.

Walk back the way you just came until reaching The Junction Hotel. Instead of crossing back to South Street, continue up Trinity Street until you reach the cinema.



9. PLAZA CINEMA

Opening in 1933, the Plaza cost the equivalent of £2.3 million in today's money to build.

Its sleek, linear appearance and the geometric patterns carved above the side windows are typical of the Art Deco era. The Plaza had just one screening room with one-thousand seats, as well as a lounge and tearoom. The first film shown was *King Kong*, starring Fay Wray, the first UK screening of the film outside of London.

The cinema has also been used for other activities; in the Second World War, the roof was used as a lookout post to spot planes and issue air raid warnings – though most planes continued to more built-up areas, like Bristol. However, this street was one of the few places in Dorchester that was bombed; a popular bakery further down the road was destroyed, but luckily there were no fatalities.

For many years, the Plaza was famous in Dorchester for its Day-Glo blue exterior, but this changed in 1996. It has also been renovated recently, and the original lights were brought back into use for the first time in over thirty years. The Plaza has remained well-loved and in 2020 was named one of the best independent cinemas in the country!

Continue up Trinity Street and turn left into Princes Street. Walk up the road and turn left into Somerleigh Road and stop at the stone building arranged as a block of apartments.



10. OLD HOSPITAL

Now used as apartments, the original Dorset County Hospital was founded in 1840, consisting of just 20 beds to treat the working poor. Built on land donated by the banker Robert Williams, the hospital was funded by the donations of other wealthy patrons, ranging from businessmen to royalty – including Thomas Hardy and Sir Frederick Treves. By the time it was incorporated into the NHS, it had shifted its funding sources from charity to a combination of grants, pay beds, and a workers' contribution scheme – and survived until the new hospital opened in 1998.

Turn back and cross into Alington Street. Continue all the way onto High West Street. Using either the crossing to your left or right, get to the other side of the road. Then, make your way to Shire Hall.



11. SHIRE HALL

Built in 1797, this building replaced an earlier hall that dated back to at least 1610 and functioned as Dorset's courthouse through to 1955. In that time, it saw hundreds of cases, such as the execution of Martha Brown for the murder of her husband in 1856, with it claimed that witnessing this influenced Thomas Hardy's works and morbid curiosity. Dorchester's last hanging was in 1941 with the execution of David Jennings, a 21-year-old soldier who was found guilty of murdering an elderly tailor. But arguably the most famous case held here was the trial of the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' in 1834. Faced with ever-decreasing wages, six farm labourers formed a union. The six men were: George Loveless; his brother James; James Hammett; Thomas Standfield; his son John; and James Brine. Fearful of such activity, the local magistrate, James Frampton, ordered a notice to be posted around Dorset threatening union members with transportation. Summoned to court two days later, the six men walked the seven miles into Dorchester to plead their case – before being arrested, stripped, shaved, and thrown into the cells on their arrival. Despite unionism being officially legal, the prosecution eventually used the Union's initiation ceremony as an excuse to charge them under the 1797 Mutiny Act. The men were sentenced to the maximum seven years transportation to Australia. George Loveless declared "We were uniting together to preserve ourselves, our wives and our children from utter degradation and starvation."

Though seen initially as a success by the Judge, local gentry, and Government, there was a huge backlash from the working class. One demonstration in April 1834 saw an estimated 100,000 people march through London to deliver 800,000 signatures to the Prime Minister, even after the Government sent thousands of soldiers and policemen, as well as almost 30 cannons to face them down. It took two more years to persuade the Government to pardon the men, who eventually arrived home in 1837 to a warm welcome and farm leases in Essex donated by their supporters. On the left of the building, you can see the bronze relief dedicated to the Tolpuddle Martyrs by the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1993. If you would like to learn more about the Tolpuddle Martyrs and others tried here, why not take a look inside?

Walk down High West Street, past Holy Trinity Church, until you are facing the next stop, it is the white building with black wooden window frames and beams.

12. JUDGE JEFFERIES

Built in the early 17th Century, this building has seen a lot of history. During the English Civil War, it was used as the Parliamentarian Headquarters for the South-West; the Duke of Monmouth stayed here while planning his rebellion; and it hosted Judge Jeffreys during his time overseeing the 'Bloody Assizes' in the Antelope Hotel you visited earlier. The Duke himself was beheaded at Tower Hill in London ten days after his defeat in July 1685, but his followers faced a much worse fate. When Judge Jeffreys arrived in Dorchester, he stayed here while he tried the rebels at the Antelope Hotel, apparently using a secret passageway to travel between the two buildings. In total, more than 300 rebels across the country were executed, 74 of those were in Dorchester. They were "hanged, cut down while still alive, and their 'privy parts' cut off and burnt before their eyes. Only then were they beheaded, after which their bodies were divided into four quarters which were "boyled and tarred", and hung up for public exhibition." These 'quarters' were left on display for months, with two men sentenced to pillory for trying to remove them from Weymouth Pier two years later. Despite such cruel punishments, Judge Jeffreys would later claim that they were still not nearly bloody enough for the King. Such a violent past has led many to believe that the building is haunted, with sightings of a Cavalier, slamming doors, and footsteps being heard at night.

Continue down the street until you are facing the Corn Exchange, the building with the large clock tower.

13. CORN EXCHANGE

Dorchester Corn Exchange was built in 1847, designed by the local architect Benjamin Ferrey, and is now a Grade II listed building. Built using local stone from Broadmayne, Bath, and Portland, it originally housed not only a corn exchange but an assembly hall and council chamber also. Seventeen years after its completion, Mayor Galpin helped fund the addition of a clocktower – a decision that caused such concern among the locals, thanks to its slender design, that it became known as "Galpin's Folly." Luckily, these fears seem to have been unfounded, and in 1876 a main entrance was added. Corn exchanges were common across England until around the end of the nineteenth century, serving (as the name suggests) as a market to trade corn. Since the decline of this practice, the building has been repurposed as a venue for events such as theatre, exhibitions, and weddings. Inside you can find a tapestry made in 2005 to mark the 700th anniversary of Dorchester's recognition as the County Town of Dorset by King Edward I. Designed by Suzanne Finch, it was embroidered, painted, and quilted by members of the local community and children from schools around Dorchester.

Starting on the same side of the street as the Corn Exchange, walk through High East Street until you reach the King's Arms, recognised by its columned entrance.



14. KINGS ARMS

The existence of the Kings Arms Hotel can be dated back to the 1500s, with the current building being built in 1720. Its history is largely tied up with the novelist Thomas Hardy, who had become a regular patron; it is believed that Hardy wrote *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in one of the upstairs rooms, and Hardy's enjoyment of the King's Arms led him to use the name in his book. Whilst the Kings Arms has strong connections to the writer, he is not the only famous person to have stayed here. Others include Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*; Queen Victoria; King George IV; The Beatles; and The Rolling Stones.



Continuing along High East Street, cross to the right side of the road, then cross the junction with Church Street and walk down to Majestic Wine.

15. CHANNONS

Now inhabited by Majestic Wine, this building was home to Stroud and Co. Carriage Works, who had been manufacturing since 1810. In 1898, the company was bought by Edward Channon. Channon continued producing and repairing carriages. However, by 1905, Ernest Channon had designed and produced the first motor car in Dorset, a monumental achievement for both the period and Channon himself, who had minimal access to suppliers; many of the parts had been designed and manufactured here. Over the following years, they built six cars, roughly costing £270 each, approximately £21,000 in today's money. However, Channons faced stiff competition in the form of the Model 'T' Ford, which cost significantly less, priced at £170. This meant Channon's car never found wide success. Channons also built a prototype aeroplane in 1909, and trials were conducted a short distance away at Maiden Castle, but the engine was not powerful enough for the plane to achieve a successful flight and he abandoned it the following year. In 1912 William Morris, the owner of Morris Motors set out to find engineering companies which could service and sell cars, Morris appointed a company in Basingstoke and then contracted Channons. It became an agency which Channons would hold until the 1970s.

Walk back up High East Street, turning left into Cornhill, so you return to the Town Pump.



SCAN ME

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