For the four hundred years of the Roman era there was never more than a small settlement in what the later Saxon inhabitants called “weala-denu” (“Valley of the Britons”) and we now call Saffron Walden. However, by the time the Domesday Book was written in 1086, there was a village of about 120 households.

In the 1130s and 1140s the Norman Lord of the Manor Geoffrey de Mandeville 3rd Earl of Essex did three things that led to Walden becoming the economic and administrative centre of the town. He built the castle, moved the market from Newport and founded a Benedictine Priory. The Priory became Walden Abbey in 1190; it was given to Sir Thomas Audley in 1525.

The building was in the form of two courtyards, and was surrounded by almshouses, a hall, a church and a large kitchen garden. The Priory was forced to close in 1539 when the Dissolution of the Monasteries was ordered by Henry VIII. The almshouses were granted by Act of Parliament in 1584, and two almshouses still stand today.

The Priory became the School of the Cluniac Friars of St John of Jerusalem, a school for training young men for the religious life. The Friars occupied the Priory for over 150 years. When the religious houses were dissolved in 1539, the Friars were allowed to stay in the Priory until 1544.

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Prosperity returned in the nineteenth century with the growth of the malting and brewing industries and with farming still at the centre of the area’s economy. The Gibsons, who were bankers and brewers, were one of the wealthiest families in the town. They were Quakers and great philanthropists and were involved in the founding of the museum, the library, the hospital, the transfer of the Friends’ School to the town from Croydon, digging wells and eventually bringing the branch line of the railway in 1865. The Victorian prosperity is reflected in buildings around the Market Square and to the south of the town.

Changes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have included the demise of the branch line of the railway in 1964, the stopping of the regular livestock markets, large modern housing developments on the outskirts and latterly infill developments in the town centre. Saffron Walden has a growing population of 15,000 people and is widely recognised as a safe, healthy place to live within easy reach of London and Cambridge.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SAFFRON WALDEN

A Saffron Walden Initiative Project

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SAFFRON WALDEN TOWN TRAIL

- Illustrated map
- Guide to places of interest
- Short history of Saffron Walden
1. Market Place

The market is still held here on Tuesdays and Saturdays as it has been since the thirteenth century. The Market Place is dominated by Victorian buildings. Barclays Bank was designed by Elened Newfield as a bank for Gibson & Co. in 1874. The stone portico and timber framed additions to the Georgian Town Hall were designed by Edward Burgess and were a gift to the town from George Stacey Gibson in 1879. The Tourist Information Centre is housed here. The drinking fountain (pictured) was also a gift to the town from the Gibson family in 1863 to commemorate the marriage of The Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. The Library, once The Corn Exchange, is of Italianate style designed by Richard Tress and completed in 1848.

2. The Old Sun Inn

The crossroads at which the Old Sun Inn stands has timber framed buildings on all four corners. The Old Sun Inn is a range of Grade I listed homes and shops dating from the fourteenth century with many different types of decorative plaster work called ‘pargetting’. These include incised repeat patterns, some freehand designs and later bas-relief of birds and fruits, possibly dating to 1676. The end gable (pictured) shows two figures and opinion is divided as to whether they are Tom Hickathrift and The Wisbech Giant or Gog and Magog.

3. Museum and Castle Ruins

The museum collections are housed in one of the oldest purpose built museum buildings in the country, completed in 1835. Its ethnographic collection is of national importance. It has everything from mammoth tusks to mummies, from an early Tudor bed to a natural history gallery. Walden Castle was built by Geoffrey de Mandeville 3rd Earl of Essex in the 1130s or 40s. The keep ruins of Flint and mortar (pictured) are all that remains, but the line of the inner and outer bailey helped create the shape of the town centre today. The ruins are Grade I listed.

4. Castle Street

This street was part of the new town plan of the 1140s but most of the timber framed hall houses now date from around 1500. Some of the houses are Grade II* listed properties with many examples of ancient and modern pargetting. There are a number of unusual Walden houses, the easiest to identify is at No 49/51 (pictured). This style of hall house under a single roof is normally associated with Kent. The house also has sliding sash windows which are commonly found in Saffron Walden houses. By the 1800s this was the poorer section of town with many of the houses divided into small cottages. Clear breaks in the roof lines give clues as to the extent of the original houses.

5. Fry Art Gallery and Bridge End Garden

The path to Bridge End Garden passes the Fry Art Gallery which was built in 1856 by Francis Gibson to hold his personal art collection. It was then inherited by his daughter Elizabeth Fry. Since 1987 it has housed a collection of the works of the Great Bardfield group of artists who settled in the Essex countryside in the 1930s. Started by his father, it was Francis Gibson who expanded Bridge End Garden introducing a Dutch garden, rose garden, kitchen garden, wilderness area, hedge maze and a lovely south facing lawn with a summerhouse (pictured). The garden has now been restored with help from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Bridge End Garden was commended in the 2018 UK Heritage Awards as a “Hidden Gem”, www.fryartgallery.org

7. 1, Myddylton Place and The Close

1. Myddylton Place (pictured) is Grade I listed and is one of the finest medieval buildings in the town. It was built as a combined shop, home and warehouse in the 1490s. There is a fine doorway into Bridge Street and a carved dragon post on the corner. The sack hoist in the roof was added in the early nineteenth century when part of the building was converted to a malt house. Diagonally across the road from Myddylton Place stands The Close, a fine late fifteenth century timber framed house with later additions including an unusual seventeenth century ‘Spider’ window.

8. Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin

The earliest features of the largest parish church in Essex date from 1250 but the majority of the church was rebuilt in the Perpendicular style between 1470 and 1525. The church size reflects the wealth of the town at the height of the saffron trade. With the addition of the spire in 1832 the tower is 193 feet (59m) high. The interior of the church has a wonderful organ with spectacular Trompeta Real pipes, nine medieval brasses and some fine stained glass windows. Among the monuments are Lord Audley’s Belgian slate tomb in the south aisle, his grave being at the east end of the churchyard www.stmaryssaffronwalden.org

9. The Old Cross Keys

The Cross Keys is a fifteenth century timber framed former house and shop with later additions. The roof was raised in the early nineteenth century and new windows added on the ground and first floors of the King Street frontage. The plaster on the entire timber framed section was taken off in the early twentieth century and some first floor windows reinstated. At the corner of King Street and High Street on the ground floor are the finest medieval buildings in the town. It was built as a combined shop, home and warehouse in the 1490s. There is a fine doorway into Bridge Street and a carved dragon post on the corner. The sack hoist in the roof was added in the early nineteenth century when part of the building was converted to a malt house. Diagonally across the road from Myddylton Place stands The Close, a fine late fifteenth century timber framed house with later additions including an unusual seventeenth century ‘Spider’ window.

10. The Rows

At the start of the Rows, on the corner of King Street and Cross Street stands a large late fifteenth century hall house (pictured). The house shows clearly how large houses were divided into three different elements with the open hall section having its roof raised in the eighteenth century. The Rows were the town’s shopping centre from medieval times onwards, with 33 of the 46 shops in the town sited there in 1630. The shops started as market stalls and progressed to become permanent home and business premises combined. On Cross Street are some of the best preserved Tudor shop windows which had shutters that opened to provide a counter and a canopy over the goods.