A brief history of Huntingdon

Huntingdon is situated on Ermine Street, a Roman road from London to York, where it crosses England’s third longest river, the Great Ouse. Godmanchester, just south of the river, was the major settlement, with the Roman name of Durovigutum, while Huntingdon had a villa that overlooked Portholme meadow.

The name Huntingdon is derived from the Old English ‘Huntedun’, meaning Hunta’s Hill. Edward the Elder, a Saxon king, captured Huntingdon from the Danish Vikings about AD 921, and it became the county town of Huntingdonshire.

By 1066 Huntingdon was a Royal Borough with a mint which issued its own coinage. A Royal Charter was granted in 1205. By the 13th century the town was prosperous with about 15 churches, three monasteries and three hospitals. Following the Black Death of 1348-9 and the decline of trade on the river, the town’s population decreased drastically.

Hinchinbrooke Priory closed in 1536, passed to the Cromwell family, then became Hinchinbrooke House, the home of the Earls of Sandwich.

Oliver Cromwell, 1599 to 1658, the Lord Protector was born and brought up in Huntingdon. During the Civil War, Huntingdon was held by Parliament and to the detriment of the town, King Charles briefly held Huntingdon in 1645.

Located on the Great North Road, Huntingdon became a major coaching centre in the 17th and 18th centuries, and until 1800 Huntingdon was a linear settlement. In the second half of the 19th century, after the arrival of the railway, the town gradually began to expand.

After 1960 Huntingdon grew substantially with the development of new estates which encouraged people and businesses to relocate from London. Over the last 30 years there has been more growth on the western side of town. The town centre has seen many changes since 2000 and continues to evolve whilst preserving the best of the old Huntingdon.

The montage on the front cover is entitled “A Bridge Through Time” by Sue Martin and Alan Akeroyd, 2009. A large wall mounted version of this artwork can be found on the wall of Huntingdon Library, Princes Street (first floor).

Every care is taken in compiling the information for this town trail. BID Huntingdon assumes no responsibility for errors or changes. Produced by the Artworks Tel: 01487 842687 Printed 2011
Start outside the **TOWN HALL** 1, which was built in 1745 and has been modified many times since. The interior has two early 19th century law courts, a council chamber and a ballroom containing many fine portraits.

The Town Hall dominates the south side of **MARKET HILL** 2. At the centre of the square is the ‘Thinking Soldier’ **WAR MEMORIAL** 3, sculpted by Kathleen Scott, the widow of ‘Scott of the Antarctic’. It was unveiled in 1923 and is considered to be one of the nation’s top 100 war memorials.

The memorial faces an attractive façade, dated 1727, next to the former **FOUNTAIN HOTEL** 4. Note the central Venetian style window that lit the 18th century ballroom. In the coaching era this inn competed with its main rival the George Hotel.

On the opposite side of the square are some of the town’s most distinguished buildings, including the 16th century **FALCON INN** 5, with a broad oriel window. It was reputedly a headquarters for Oliver Cromwell during the Civil War. Next door is **WYKEHAM HOUSE** 6, the first home of the London and County Bank (which became Westminster Bank). Set back by the east wall of the church a memorial to Thomas Jetherell, a member of the Cromwell family are buried in the church. The Victorian organ saints’ has some Norman stone work, but with a lot of later additions. It contains a font, from St John’s Church, believed to be that in which Oliver Cromwell was baptised. Members of the Cromwell family are buried in the church. The Victorian organ chamber by Sir G Gilbert Scott has some excellent carvings.

From Market Hill, turn north up the High Street, noting on the left the **FALCON INN** 5, a seat of learning for both Oliver Cromwell and Samuel Pepys, has a varied history. It was originally the western end of a long infirmary hall that had two aisles and a chapel. This belonged to the Hospital of St John the Baptist, founded by David, the Scottish Earl of Huntingdon, in the second half of the 12th century. The Borough of Huntingdon took control of the Hospital in the 14th century and the hall was later reduced in size. From 1565 the building was in use as the Borough’s Grammar School. In 1877 the entire structure was completely rebuilt under the direction of Robert Hutchinson; the famous Irish Playwright Dion Boucicault largely paid for the restoration in memory of his son.

The Cromwell Museum was established in the old school in 1962, and displays a great collection of Cromwelliana, including paintings. Return to the Market Square. At the rear of the Town Hall is the **MARKET INN** 15 situated in one of the few remaining networks of passages left in the town. The main entrance in Raitt’s Passage has a timber frame upper storey.

Continue south of Barclays Bank where much of the High Street has been rebuilt in the past fifty years.

**ST BENEDICT’S COURT** 20 on the right, a paved area with seats and a fountain, was once a churchyard. St Benedict’s foundations lie under an adjacent shop; its tower was pulled down in 1804 and the dressed masonry used to build the Barley Mow public house in Hartford’s Main Street, about 1.5 miles away. On the left is the entrance to **CHEQUERS COURT** 21 shopping precinct, built 1960-1966 and added to since; this incorporates part of the town’s largest brewery, which ceased brewing in 1954.

The **COMMEMORATION HALL** 22 was built in 1842 as the Huntingdon Literary & Scientific Institute. The façade has a replica Statue of Minerva. The Institute had public rooms, library, museum and displays a great collection of Cromwelliana, including paintings. From here the **RIVERSIDE PARK** 34 extends to the old village of HARTFORD. View the downstream side of the old stone bridge then cross the road by the traffic island to the path by the Hotel. Walk on to the footbridge, built 1965-66.

**HUNTINGDON & GODMANCHESTER BRIDGE** 33, completed about 1332, is a unique monument to the rivalry between the ‘twin towns’ who built it, with six arches, each slightly different. Two of the upstream arches on the Huntingdon end have decoration. The central portion of the bridge is wider than its approaches, because the builders failed to agree on correct alignment. The most obvious differences are the cutwaters; Huntingdon’s are v-shaped and Godmanchester’s semi-hexagonal.

From the footbridge **PORTHOLME MEADOW** may be seen beyond the A14 road bridge (1973-75). The meadow is bordered by the Alconbury Brook at its confluence with the Great Ouse river, which is navigable from Bedford to King’s Lynn.
Return to the Old Bridge Hotel and follow the road to CASTLE HILLS 12, the site of Huntingdon Castle. The great earthworks were built over part of the Saxon Town by order of William the Conqueror in 1068. The castle had a stormy career, and after the siege of 1174, King Henry II had the timbers walls destroyed.

The site remained the seat of the Honour of the Earls of Huntingdon, and had a great hall, chapel, small stone gatehouse and a county gaol. During the 17th century Civil Wars the castle was remodelled as an artillery fortification. Later, a windmill stood on the large hill with pine trees. By the 19th century it was part of a garden, through which a railway link from Godmanchester was cut in 1851. The railway closed to passengers in 1959, and the Huntingdon Bypass was built on the line of the railway 1973-75, later becoming the A14 highway. This site is home to the town’s beacon.

From the castle, follow the footpath behind the hill past a row of houses to a small car park. MILL COMMON 17 is Mill Common Road, where during the 1960s excavations evidence was uncovered of a Roman Villa, a Saxon cemetery with over 400 skeletons, a chapel, gallows and two windmills. Before returning to the town centre you may take a detour from the car park turning left on a road leading under the A14 to the Gasworks Bridge, where paths cross Portholme Meadow, leading to Godmanchester, Brampton and the long-distance Ouse Valley Way. Portholme is said to be the largest water meadow in England. It was a racecourse until 1896, and an aerodrome for pioneer aviators between 1910 and 1913.

Before crossing the ring road towards the bus station, note the ANTIQUE CENTRE 38 in St Mary’s Street, which was once a maltings and in 1912 became the town’s Territorial Army Depot. The Tudor style building along The Walks East is THE ARCHDEACONRY LIBRARY & HALL 39, built in 1890, also by Hutchinson.

From the pedestrian crossing, proceed behind the bus station to Princes Street, passing LAWRENCE COURT 40, an 18th century grade two listed building on the left and the new HUNTINGDON LIBRARY & ARCHIVES 41, opened in 2009, before returning to the start in Market Hill.