

Walk Spalding's history with new booklet



The materials to build Abbey Buildings is said to have come from the old priory. Photo: SG310713-221TW

Have you heard of the Great Fire of... Spalding or the river Westlode in town?

No, it's more than likely that you haven't, unless you have done a lot of research into local history.

Now, with the publication of a new booklet, it's possible to take in the town's history and its historic landmarks during a series of three short walks.

Produced by The Friends of Chain Bridge Forge, Historic Walks is a guide to three walks: Spalding Town and Markets, the port of Spalding and its merchants, and Ayscoughfee Hall, the parish church and river Welland.

Geoff Taylor, chairman of The Friends of Chain Bridge Forge, said: "Spalding has a rich history which is often forgotten and the forge thought by creating this booklet we could get visitors and the community to explore it and appreciate its treasures."

Each walk is described in detail and illustrated by a simple map.

As people follow the walk, the guide offers historical information, such as details of the 1715 fire, started in a blacksmith's shop in Abbey Yard.

Sparks were blown by high winds on to surrounding thatched roofs and, in the space of four hours, 84 houses and buildings around the market place were destroyed. That included the town hall with its cupola, where the town bell once hung.

The guide tells us: "Ultimately the fire was contained by a naval engineer who used gun powder to blow up a property opposite the White Hart to create a fire break. Sadly, he lost his life in the explosion, the only casualty of the fire."

The booklet is full of fascinating facts: who knew, for instance, that the carillon bells in South Holland Centre are from the original Corn Exchange that once stood on the same site, or that each bell bears the name of a serviceman lost on active service during the First World War?

It's information about this kind of historic artefact, usually invisible to the general public in the street, that is particularly interesting to newcomers as well as people who have lived in the town for some time.

Many of us know that Spalding once had a priory, and the booklet tells us it held an important place in the town for nearly 500 years.

However, there is very little evidence that it ever existed – other than the Abbey Buildings, constructed from its materials – and so it is interesting to learn more about it.

According to the booklet, the priory was founded in Spalding around AD1052 by six Benedictine monks from Crowland Abbey, which had outgrown its available space.

The booklet tells us: "The priory was demolished in 1539 after The Dissolution. However, the materials were used in many buildings across the town."

The Prior's Oven on the corner of Hall Place and the Sheep Market is said to be the last remaining building of the town's ancient priory, once forming a corner of the enclosed priory wall. Its vaulted ground floor room was built in around 1230 as the monastery prison. We read: "Originally, this incorporated a second storey containing a bell, which tolled on the event of a public execution."

As shoppers dart down the Hole in the Wall Passage between the market place and The Crescent – built in 1842 – they are walking in the footsteps of the monks as the passage is thought to be one of the entrances to the priory. In fact, the booklet says some of the old stones can be seen on the left of the passage as you join it from the market place.

The point where The Crescent narrows outside the offices of these newspapers is believed to be the point where the main priory entrance once stood.

Near this point is the Sessions House and the old police station, built in 1857.

We learn that the Spalding area was one of the last in the country to have a police force once it was made compulsory in 1856.

The booklet reads: "An earlier force was formed in 1830 which was disbanded after a couple of months because of the drunkenness among its members."

Interestingly, to the right of the Sessions House was something called a House of Correction from 1826 to 1884.

Finally, to the river that ran along New Road, once called the Beast Market because cattle were sold in this part of town. The open river was called the Westlode and ran along the street's centre to join the Welland.