

A brief history of Woodstock

After their conquest of England, the Norman kings indulged their love of hunting by setting aside vast swathes of countryside as royal parks. One of the most important was the Manor of Woodstock.

In the early 12C, King Henry I enclosed the park with a wall seven miles long - the earliest known park wall in England - and moved the residents to what is now known as Old Woodstock. New Woodstock, the main part of the town, was a medieval 'new town' created in the late 12C by Henry II. Spending a good deal of time there, with his mistress 'Fair Rosamund', he found the palace too small for his large entourage and bought land adjoining the park for the building of inns to accommodate his attendants.

Woodstock Manor continued as an important royal palace for several hundred years until it was besieged and damaged beyond repair during the Civil War. For almost 60 years the Manor stood derelict and the town went into decline.

In 1704 the estate was granted to the Duke of Marlborough as a reward for his victory at the Battle of Blenheim. The next 70 years saw the regeneration of Woodstock. The building of Blenheim Palace was mirrored in the town, where many timber framed houses were rebuilt or refronted with the symmetrical stone facades that give the town its predominantly Georgian appearance. There were also dramatic changes in the park, where Capability Brown transformed the landscape - though the effects on Woodstock would have been even more drastic had his scheme to add battlements to the park wall and all the houses visible from the palace ever been carried out!

The buildings and fortunes of Woodstock had been restored...

Discovering Woodstock

Woodstock was founded, almost 900 years ago, to cater for visitors. Not all modern visitors are connected to royalty but the tradition of hospitality endures. This short walk looks at the buildings and history of the town but those seeking retail therapy or refreshment will be delighted that it passes many of the shops, pubs and eateries for which Woodstock is renowned.

Listed below are a few suggestions for exploring Woodstock in more depth:

Woodstock Visitor Information Centre

An excellent source for further information on Woodstock. *Open 7 days a week.*

Tel: 01993 813276

Email: woodstock.vic@westoxon.gov.uk

The Oxfordshire Museum

A number of galleries and exhibitions celebrating Oxfordshire in all its diversity.

Closed on Mondays (except Bank Holidays).

The Woodstock Wall Hangings

In the Town Hall, on the walls of the Assembly Room, are 17 embroidered panels depicting the history of Woodstock.

No set opening times but occasionally open to the public.

The Kneelers

Woodstock Church has a superb collection of over 200 individualised kneelers and a musical clock that plays tunes on the hour.

Generally open during daylight hours.

We are happy to provide this information in other formats. Please call 01993 861615 if this is required.

Woodstock Town Walk



This walk begins in Park Street, by the stocks and opposite the church, close to the town centre.

Approx 1.1 miles / 1.7 km



www.oxfordshirecotswolds.org
A service provided by West Oxfordshire District Council

Woodstock Town Walk

Park Street, tree lined and flanked by Georgian houses, many with the stone door hoods on iron brackets so typical of Woodstock, is an unlikely entry to Blenheim Palace. But turn the corner and there is the main entrance, **The Woodstock Gate** ①, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor in 1723. The original intention to site the entrance on the road to Oxford was thwarted by a stubborn smallholder, who refused to allow it on his land.

Retrace your steps past **Chaucer's House** ② (1752) before turning left down *Chaucer's Lane* - these refer not to the famous poet but his son, who had a house here. Continue into *Harrison's Lane* and down towards the main road. Standing on the embankment above *Oxford Street* you'll see, across the road, the distinctive **Octagon House** ③, a converted chapel. Turn to your left and, in the far distance, you should see **The Column of Victory** ④ - a 134ft column topped by a statue of the 1st Duke of Marlborough.

Continue down onto *Oxford Street*, following the road round to the right. The late 18C and early 19C was the golden age of coaching and **The Marlborough Arms** ⑤, its façade dating to at least 1730 but with much earlier elements, still has its arched gateway and cobbled yard.

Now stroll down *Market Street* past **The Feathers Hotel** ⑥, with a carved 14C figure on the wall, until you get to **The Bear Hotel** ⑦. The main block is five bay Georgian with a central coach entrance; the block beyond is earlier (1700) and has a doorway showing two bears fighting for grapes; beyond is a smaller gabled 16C wing.

Now head back to the **Town Hall** ⑧. Designed by Sir William Chambers in 1766, the ground floor was originally an open market hall until enclosed in 1898. To your right is **Vickers** ⑨, which has an arched door hood on iron brackets, a 1668 date stone and two original gabled dormer windows.

A few yards down the *High Street* is **Brothertons** ⑩, an ironmongers from 1712 till 1980, with an elegant two storey bay window with a horseman carved above.

On the other side, **6/8 High Street** ⑪ was formerly one house and has a 1710 date on the rain water head. **Harriet's Tearooms** ⑫ is early 17C with carved bargeboards and elaborate brackets and **No. 28, Cromwell's House** ⑬ (c1640) is where Oliver Cromwell supposedly stayed during the siege of Woodstock Manor.

Retrace your steps and then turn left into *Rectory Lane* past the old police station. On your left you pass a block of modern flats called **Cockpit Close** ⑰ - site of an 18C cock fighting pit and later a glove factory, demolished in 1961.

Just after the back entrance to the Bear Hotel, go through the stone archway and kissing gate into the churchyard*. From this path you see the oldest parts of **Woodstock Church** ⑱ - the Norman doorway with zigzag ornament and to the right two 13C windows. On your left, as you exit onto the road, there is a blue plaque on **5 Park Street** ⑲, recalling Edmund Hiorne, town clerk in the Civil War, who was forced to beg forgiveness, on his knees in the House of Commons, for giving up the town armour to the Royalists.

Across the street are **The Stocks** ⑳ - a crime against another person and both feet were fastened; a crime against yourself, eg drunk and disorderly, was a one foot offence. They were well used - the town accounts show frequent entries for their repair!

The walk ends at **Fletcher's House** ㉑, named after a Thomas Fletcher (d 1545) - a Georgian front, with slightly irregularly spaced windows, has been added to an older building.



Reaching the *Oxford Road*, look diagonally across at **Hope House** ⑭, on the corner of *Hensington Road*, possibly designed by Vanbrugh, architect of Blenheim Palace, and certainly with echoes of his style like the blind recessed arches. Continue down *Oxford Road* to **Caroline Court** ⑮, an inscription recording its foundation as almshouses in 1797, and the **Hensington Gate** ⑯, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor and with flower baskets carved by Grinling Gibbons, the massive piers moved here in the 1770s.

KEY:

- Route
- Alternative route avoiding gate
- Viewing point
- i Visitor Information Centre
- P Parking
- T Toilets

*To avoid the kissing gate and steps continue up *Rectory Lane* and then turn right into *Park Street*.