

A Historical Walk around POTTON



The Potton History Society has prepared this leaflet for the benefit of visitors to the town. (first published in July 1997, revised 2013)
For more information about the History Society contact Mr Howe on (01767) 260935, or, Mr Boston on (01767) 260440.

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POTTON TOWN

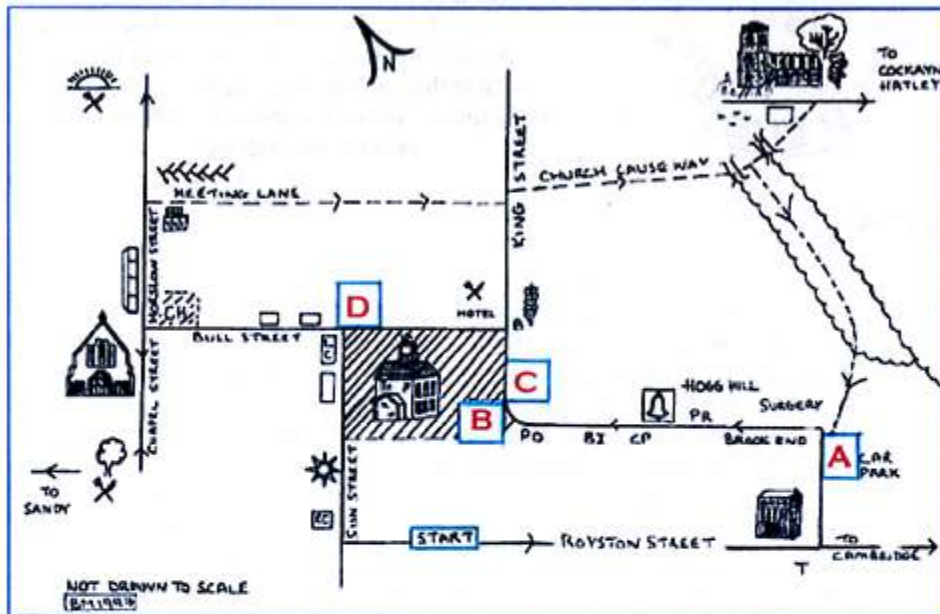
Potton is an ancient market town, with population of about 5,000. The parish covers 2,671 acres. Its history can be traced back to the 10th century. At the time of the Domesday Book Countess Judith, niece of William the Conqueror, owned the town. By 1501, the Burgoynes of neighbouring Sutton controlled Potton market, and later bought the estate. Admiral the Hon John Byng was the next owner in 1752 but his stay was short as he was sentenced to be shot on his own quarterdeck for neglecting his duty! From 1795 to 1917, the Whitbread family (the brewers) were Lords of the Manor. In medieval times Potton was one of the three most important towns in the county, and was larger in size than Biggleswade. From the 12th century it had a flourishing weekly market, with an important Horse Fair in January which continued until the 1930's. The presence of the market accounts for the large number of inns and public houses that were in the town. In 1903 about 40 of these still remained! Whilst the area surrounding Potton is largely agricultural, there was a large tannery in the town from 1589 or earlier, until 1970. There were two breweries, coprolite was quarried for fertilizer in the 18th century, and a large engineering works serviced local agriculture. The well known 'Potton' houses, a number of which can be seen in the town, were originally designed and fabricated here. The railway, which joined Potton with Bedford and Cambridge, was closed in 1968. The station, built in 1862, still remains as a private house a little along the road to Sandy. In 1783 a great fire swept through the town destroying 50 houses, damage being estimated at £25,000. However, many listed buildings remain to be seen, some dating from before the fire.

We hope you enjoy your visit to this small but historic town.

Start of the walk – car park.

Park in the public car park (no charge) **(POINT A)**. Approach from Royston Street as the road from the square is one way only. On leaving the car park look to your left. The large house on the far corner, **Granville House**, partly 17th century, is one of the mansions built by prosperous local merchants – in this case a wool merchant. The original house was largely destroyed in the Great Fire – it is said that the barns, full of fleeces, burnt fiercely. Beyond this, until a few years ago, you would have seen **Braybrooks Tannery**, famed for its manufacture of leather and parchment.

Now walk towards the Market Square along Brook End, passing the Doctor's Surgery. The area to your right was, at one time, an extension of the Market Square. Its name, **Hogg Hill**, gives a clue to its original function. The first building that you pass on the right was originally the **Parish Rooms**. Built by public subscription in 1901 on land donated by Samuel H Whitbread. The next building on the right is the **Old Fire Station** – on the roof you can see where the fire bell was housed. It was built in 1887 (as shown on the sign high on the wall) after several major fires in the town. It is now a Community Centre.



Further along is a modern garage – this is the site of the old **Blacksmith's Forge**, Over the road, and set back, is No.8 – this was the **Chequers** public house until 1979 (the pub name "Chequers" may derive from "exchequer" or collector of revenues). Beyond this, on the left, before the Post Office, is a modern house, the site of the old **Bell Inn**. The Post Office, together with the next shop No.21 was a private school for boys in the 19th century. Turn the corner to the right, noting the rounded corner of the building – a decorative feature occurring elsewhere in the town.

Stand in front of the Chinese Restaurant (**POINT B**) to view the Market Square. In the centre of the square is the **Clock House**, built in 1956, used as the Town Library, Council Offices and for the Community Police. It replaces the ancient **Shambles** – a complex with brick houses at each end, folding stalls on the south used by butchers etc, and shops on the north side. Samuel Whitbread donated the present clock in the 20th century to replace a clock with only one hand – not uncommon in early days. In 1783 the great fire destroyed the buildings on the north side (to your right) and on the east side (behind you) of the market square.

On your left, the buildings were undamaged and most date from the 16th century. Over the supermarket you will see a date of 1697 – probably the date of a renovation. Beyond this is a Barbers and an adjacent Café that still retain the original Cox's stationary sign. This was previously the **Three Horseshoes Inn**, later a printers shop. The next shop was a house of

the 17th century. All these buildings have many original features. No.21, to your left, was the original Post Office. It has a Doric pedimented doorway dating from the 18th century. Now walk along the row of shops to your right, past the butcher's, and stop outside Tysoes ironmongery, built between 1760 and 1783 by Henry Winn (**POINT C**). Successive ironmongers have used this shop for the last 150 years. Over the shop is a room where local people would settle debts and hire labour, on the day of the Horse Fair. The many inns would also have served the same purpose. Further along, past the Chemist's Shop (probably the location of the 16th century **White Hart Inn**) is a Baker's Shop, where bread has been baked for over 150 years. Look over the road to the right (the north side of the square) to the **Coach House Inn**. To the right of this inn, though there does not seem sufficient space, there used to be two shops which were demolished to enlarge the exit road, King Street. The Coach House Inn was rebuilt after the fire in 1783. Architectural features include a nice old doorway, a wing at the rear that is relatively unchanged since the early days. A drain head at the side bears the date 1785. The window built into the pub was originally a shop – an unusual combination. The newsagent (If you wish to know more of the town's history, the proprietor keeps a number of our books for sale) replaced the **George Inn** destroyed in the fire. The large carriage entrance still remains. Note the upper (restored) bay window at the newsagents, a feature of several of the older houses.

Walk along the north side to (**POINT D**) the Potton Flooring shop that was previously occupied by LloydsTSB Bank. Originally built as a house with a shop front added last century. The building is typically florid Victorian, including marble columns! Beyond the Potton Flooring shop is a house with "shiplap" boarding dating from the 16/17th centuries which survived the great fire. Looking directly across the square, you can see that the end three shops on the opposite side have a common frontage. This was originally the **White Swan Inn**, a large coaching inn built in the 16th century, which closed in 1907. Now, cross the road to walk by two large blocks of flats. The first of these, Lion Court, was converted into flats in the 1980's. The façade fronts an older structure from the 18th century. Originally there were two shops fronting on the square and prior to this it was the **Red Lion Inn**. The second block of flats is recent. Continue walking past the flats, out of the Market Square along Sun Street. Behind No.2 Sun Street is the old site of **Richardson's Mineral Water** factory. Further up the street you come to "Sun House" on the right. This was an old coaching inn, built in the 16th century, or earlier, and only closed in 1908. It remains relatively unchanged, and many of the older buildings in the town would have resembled it in style. A little way beyond Sun House is a passageway on the right leading to a building recently converted to residential flats. This was the **United Reform Church**, built in 1848 of local "ironstone" (a hard type of sandstone, common in Potton, often associated with coprolite extraction). Return to the Market Square, past the flats, and turn left into Bull Street. You pass two carriage entrances on the right. These belonged to the **Bull Inn** (No. 8) and the **Green Man** pub. The latter only closed in 1997, and until this date had an impressive pub sign in wrought iron projecting over the road. (the support still remains). Note also the oriel windows on the upper floors, together with a number of other 18th and 19th century features.

At the top of Bull Street, turn left into Chapel Street. In medieval times the cottages on the left marked the edge of the town, with countryside on the right. On the right is the Salvation Army Citadel, originally a Methodist Chapel, built in 1851 in ironstone, and rebuilt later in red brick. The iron railings are original.

If it is lunchtime, carry on to the end of Chapel Street to visit the **Royal Oak** pub over the road. This apparently old pub was completely, but sympathetically rebuilt in 1979. Otherwise, you turn back, passing the top of Bull Street, into Horslow Street. This name, known from the 13th century, is said to derive from "Ostlers Street". As you enter Horslow Street, you see on the left a row of cottages with a sign indicating that they were a bequest from William Potter. They were rebuilt in 1863, and at one time were the town workhouse. Beyond this is the entrance to the Baptist Chapel dating from 1801. On your right, you pass **Chigwell House** with its large garden – another impressive mansion built by a town notable in the 18th century. Beyond Chigwell House you pass the **Cross Keys** house until recently another inn. Further on the right, just before the narrow Meeting Lane, is the **Old Bakery**. Note the chimney at the back, it used to be very tall but was reduced in height when the building was converted to a dwelling. Beyond Meeting Lane (which was also known as Chapmans Lane), the first house was originally the 17th century **Cock Inn**.

(There is also good food at the old **Rising Sun** inn, at the end of Horslow St.).

Turn into Meeting Lane, noting the herringbone design of the ironstone walls. The lane was probably named in the early days of Non-Conformity in the town. (John Wesley preached here in 1742 but was unimpressed by the Pottonians whom he called "wild beasts in abundance"). Towards the end of the lane, you will see some "Potton Houses" behind the old wall on the right. Eventually you come to King Street. It was in this area that the Great Fire started – in 1783 in a hayrick in the yard of a house on the west side of the street. Charles Edwards rented the house from Earl Spencer (an ancestor of Diana, Princess of Wales) who owned much property in the town.

Now, cross the road to walk down Church Causeway. Immediately on the left is the site of the **Old Spencer Farmhouse**. In the base of the walls on each side of the Causeway, you can see old stonework – possibly re-used remains of the medieval Fraternity House that was located near here. You will cross two streams, both called **Potton Brook**, which join further down.

At the end of the Causeway the **Church of Saint Mary the Virgin** is seen over the road, on a small hill. On your left is **St Mary's Day and Sunday School**, built in 1848 in local ironstone in the herringbone design we have seen previously. The Day School was closed in 1876, but the extended building is in constant use today. The field beyond is church glebe land and is the scene of many local events during the year.

Cross the road to the church, which dates from the 13th century. The tower with its six bells was built in the 15th century. The church is well worth a detailed visit – but if you are short of time, look in the porch (14th century) to see the door leading to stairs up to the visiting priest's room. You can enter the church to see the new 1995 window on the south wall, designed by Mr Carl Russell, of Potton, for the church's 900th celebrations. You may also walk around outside of the church to see many listed gravestones.

Return to the road – the old 18th century **Rectory** is on your right. Walk back along the Causeway to a path, just before the second stream, on the left. Continue through the playing fields, which were donated to the town in memory of **Henry Smith** in 1934. This will bring you back to your starting point. If it is very wet, you may prefer to walk back through the town, from the King Street end of the Causeway.

Other places worth a visit locally include:- **Sutton** with its church and old packhorse bridge. **Cockayne Hatley church** with its magnificent wood carvings and **Gamlingay** with its fine 15c house "The Emplins", near the church.