

Begin at the Weighbridge

As far as we can guess, Milborne Port began with a Roman-British settlement at Wick, followed by an Anglo Saxon Manor at Kingsbury. The manor gave land so a Minster Church could be set up. The church had to be self supporting so it was given land to farm. It had a boundary for the land the church stood on, along with its staff and outbuildings. This was roughly the area bordered by the High Street and South Street, with the brook forming the rest of the boundary. It used this space, just outside of the enclosure, for a Market. The triangle formed by Thimble Lane, South Street and the High Street was the market area. (Photo 1) It stood outside of the Minster enclosure, so the merchants kept the profits, apart from a tithe to the church and taxes to the crown. The market dealt in all goods, but particularly cloth, leather & metalwork. It grew to be the most profitable in Somerset, with merchants from many other towns paying for the right to trade here, and Milborne became an important town. This area is quite confusing until you get to know it, since the only roads that are not cul-de-sacs are those making the outside of the original settlement. Inside this every road is a dead end. Fortunately there are plenty of joining footpaths.

The Town Hall was built in 1720 as a Market House, with a vaulted cellar, an arcaded ground floor. (Photo 2) There was an incident here on the evening of the fair day, 28 October 1770, a boy, (Mr. Shepherd) threw a lighted squib, made of gunpowder, from the street into the market house. The squib fell onto the stall of William Yates, who sold gingerbread and other cakes, so James Willis, who was standing at the stall, quickly grabbed the squib and threw it off the stall, to prevent injury to himself, or to Mr. Yates cakes. Unfortunately the squib landed on another stall, that of James Ryall, who also sold gingerbread. He in turn threw the squib away from his stall, but it hit young Russell Scott in the face and burst, injuring his eye. The case was a serious one, and was heard before Justice Nares at Bridgewater Summer Assize the following year. Shepherd pleaded not guilty, saying he had not thrown the squib anywhere near Russell Scott, but it was decided that, as he had initially thrown the squib and the 'natural and probable consequence' of this was injury to somebody, the intermediate actions of Mr. Yates and Mr. Ryall did not change Shepherd's liability. The jury agreed and awarded Mr. Scott £100 damages. The case is still cited in legal tomes under the law of tort. The damages awarded were to cover the amount John Scott had paid for medical help for his son, who had lost his eye.

The arches were filled in and the extension to house an internal staircase and more offices was added. The building was put to various uses, and in the 1850s it housed a school, funded by the Medlycotts. The schoolmaster was known as Daddy Read. He would take an afternoon siesta, getting one of the boys to keep watch in case a Medlycott came by. When the cellar was inspected in the late C20 a brick vaulted basement with vertical sides and ends of solid rock supporting the brick vault springing courses was rediscovered. No practicable means of entry were found and the basement was full of clean water, with some silt. (Photo 3) There were two openings in the rock which could be an intake and outlet for the water. As a pump was situated close to the market house the reservoir may have been for this.

Walk along the High Street

The doorway with Norman carving is the entrance to the Guildhall. The doorway is made up of C11 fragments: the jambs are chevron moulded, and impost blocks support a stilted segmental arch (probably part of a wider span Norman arch) formed of moulded 'T' corbels. The Guild was established in the C12, and later became the Commonalty Charity which still uses the upper room. (Photo 4) In 1854 the lower room was used as the town lock up. Notice the stone mullioned window in the side wall of the projecting cottage. This has ornate

bargeboards to the East gable, and a late C18 2 light hollow chamfered window with pointed arched lights and deep cut spandrels under square label; shaped corbel to corner over chamfer below. It is actually stone although painted to look like wood. Fires were common, and many buildings were rebuilt using those parts that had been saved, but presenting a later appearance on the outside.

Turn left into the Ball Court

In 1847 Sir William Coles Medlycott had the Ball Court built 'for the health and amusement of the town.' There is a lovely story from 1898; there was a thunderstorm in August, and the young son of Mr Weare was bowling an iron hoop here. Suddenly lighting flashed, and startled he let go of the hoop. He was lucky, when he recovered from the fright it was to find all that remained of his hoop was a piece of wire, twisted into fantastic shapes. (Photo 5) Across the road is the Tippling Philosopher, in business by 1630, as the Tippler. In 1644 the scientist and philosopher Robert Boyle returned to live at Stalbridge Park. He often drank here, so it became known as the Tippling Philosopher. It was renamed the Kings Head following the coronation of George IV in 1820, but returned to its original name in the late C20. It was a commercial inn and was used for public meetings and concerts. In 1837 one hundred local men, employed to work on enlargements to Ven, sat down to supper in an upstairs room, giving an idea of the size of the inn.

Enter the Churchyard

Written records exist from 950 for the minster church at Milborne Port. This would have been very impressive, high on the hill overlooking the countryside. Around 1050/60 the Minster was rebuilt with a blend of Anglo Saxon and Romanesque work. Most of the old minster was destroyed in the Victorian rebuilding of the church, but some stonework remains at the foot of the existing church tower, as do the capitals belonging to the blocked Anglo Saxon windows, Inside, the south and north of the four Anglo Saxon crossing arches survive; they have been slightly deformed to an elliptical shape due to the pressure of the masonry, as the tower has been heightened. The chancel has some pilaster strip work, and in spite of the rebuild, 37 pieces of Anglo Saxon sculpture have been identified, including the carving over the South Door, the stairs to the bell tower, and the pilaster work high on the south wall of the chancel. Church House now occupies the site of the original vicarage. (Photo 6) In 1867 the old church was enlarged; the nave, aisle, and north transept of the Saxon church were demolished and a new longer nave and north aisle were built. There is a single C14 traceried 4 light East window; the South transept has C12 style windows in the East and West walls, and a 2 light C13 style window in South wall. The West front is a copy of the C15 original. The lower stage of the Tower is C11; the two plain stages above the roof line are C14/C15. On the South West corner is an octagonal turret of Saxon/Norman character, with a hipped stone roof; much of the masonry is faced with small square slabs set diamond wise. The mortuary was built, incorporating fragments of early carving from the old church.

Cross Bathwell Lane & stand

From this point we can see Canons Court, which gets its name from the Church Canons who lived here before the reformation. (Photo 7) They also had a mill down in the valley below us. The Marquis of Anglesey purchased Mearing's Mill, at Canon Court, in 1824, he had introduced the making of sailcloth in 1823.

The old cottages that face the end of the High Street are particularly interesting. The Somerset Vernacular Building Group researched them and it appears that they were probably originally built as a Church House. This would have been a place for beer to be brewed, and

a hall where events, called Church Ales, could be held for fund raising. They were established by the Synod of Exeter in 1287. In Anglo Saxon times, ale or mead were the usual drinks, or wine for the wealthy. Vineyards had been planted in England by the Romans and there were still 38 in production when the Domesday Book was written in 1086. The English were notorious for drinking; in the eighth century, the Archbishop of Canterbury was accused that his Bishops got drunk and encouraged others to do the same. The clergy produced a wine called Theologicum, said to be the best in England. In 975 King Edgar tried to limit drinking; no village could have more than one alehouse and all drinking horns had to have pins at roughly half pint intervals. No man was supposed to drink beyond the pin before passing the horn on; inevitably, it became a game to see how many pins a man could uncover. Brewing developed into one of Milborne Port's main industries, with the arable crops changing from corn and hemp to barley from 1629.

Church Ales died out in the seventeenth century but in 1603 Sir Edward Parham, attended the Milborne Port church ale which was supported by many '*substantial householders of honesty and good credit.*' The earliest part of the surviving building is probably late 15 century.

Re-cross the churchyard and leave by the east gate onto Church Street

Look down the lane and you are looking at one of the main crossing roads of the Anglo Saxon Port. (Photo 8) This is one of the oldest inhabited parts of the village, although little remains. Initially this area probably housed the clerical and lay members of the Minster. As the town grew other traders and craftsmen moved in. In Anglo Saxon times there were cloth makers and merchants, many of whom dealt in the most expensive cloth. The Anglo Saxon gold and silver smiths had developed new metal working techniques, such as filigree, and cloisonné jewellery. Since there was a mint at Milborne Port it is likely that such fine metal work was being done here. Under King Alfred Burghs and ports were the only places where coins could be minted, and more than 13 coins from the mint in Milborne Port, dating from 997 to 1035 still exist, one is held by Shaftesbury museum. The tenth century was a time of upheaval in the church as the Benedictine Rule reforms ousted lay members from church property and restricted it to ordained clergy. Milborne Port's Minster would have had many Lay members who may then have chosen to rent property here, just outside the Minster enclave. '*A large old house, with carved oak ceilings, quaint windows and stone arches, said to be connected with monkish times*' stood here until the 1700's. Greystones is an early C18 cottage but incorporates much of an earlier building. It is a typical late medieval plan with a room either side of a central hall. There is a large fireplace at the west end of the cottage, with an inglenook and bread oven, and a stone staircase is built into the chimney stack. The George Inn, first recorded in 1550, stood on Church Street, on Saturday 11 September 1824, Mr Russell, a maltster, got drunk at the George Inn. His son was with him and they left to go home in their gig, but on the way they started to argue, and this turned into a scuffle for control of the reins. When they arrived home, the angry father sent for the constable to take his son into custody. Mr Russell then walked into his yard, and fell down dead. The only wound was a slight mark on his left eyebrow, but his death was presumed to have been caused by an internal injury, leaving his son detained until the result of the Coroner's Inquest.

Turn right down Chapel Street

Nothing to do with the original settlement, but the Old Independent Meeting House was built in 1751 for the local Nonconformist congregation. Mr Simon Paine, a tanner, gave the land, which Mr Medlycott, as Lord of the Manor, made freehold. The Church is Single storey, 2 bays wide by 3 bays long. The attached Schoolroom is also Single storey; 3 bays, of which centre bay is gabled and projects slightly. It had it's own burial ground, but I am not sure it was ever used for burials or just for remembrance stones. In 1779 the Toleration Act was

amended by substituting belief in scripture for belief in the Anglican articles; nonconformist churches were now accepted, although penalties on property remained. A group called the Deputies of the Three Denominations had been set up to look after the interests of Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists, and in 1808 they were called to rule on a case in Milborne Port. William Owen had refused to bury a young woman, except on a Sunday, although her mother had asked that the funeral be held on Saturday evening. As the woman was a dissenter, the Deputies became involved and they informed the Bishop of Bath and Wells. After checking the facts of the case, the Bishop replied that William Owen had a good reason for his action. The last time a dissenter was interred on a weekday, the friends of the deceased got the keys of the gallery and introduced their own singers, contrary to the forms of the established church. As he expected a repetition of this, Owen chose a Sunday to prevent it. Because the dissenters had acted wrongly in the past, the deputies had to agree that they could not interfere in the affair, but illogically threatened that in future they would compel the curate to do his duty.

Return to Church Lane, turn right, walk across to Thimble Lane,

Silas Dyke the glove manufacturer had been an apprentice at Ensor's, and when Edward Ensor left in 1837, Silas Dyke decided to start his own firm. By 1851 he was living in Church Street, with his wife and six children, and employing 21 men in his factory in Puddlebrook, possibly in what had previously been the workhouse. More about that later. Church Street would have been one of the main routes into the Anglo Saxon settlement. The road came down East Hill, along East Street and across here. Many towns were built on a square plan, with streets crossing in the middle. The outline of the Minster Settlement is made up of the High Street to the north, and South Street to the east, while the curve of the stream completes the rectangle. The crossing streets were Church Street running east to west, and Church lane running north to south. (Photo 9) There would have been some sort of enclosure, for protection, although this was not a walled town. Most likely there was a wooden palisade, enough to keep out wild animals and deter outlaws from entering at night to steal.

Gardeners Cottage is mainly C18 but with C15 parts incorporated. The gatehouse has a central 4 centre moulded arch doorway and old studded boarded door, and above is the upper portion of a 3 light flat-arched window with cinquefoil traceried heads, which may be from an earlier building, either here or closer to the church. South St was mostly thatched until WW2, when the roofs were covered with corrugated iron to protect against fire. The last thatched roof was replaced by tile in 1990. (Photo 10 & 11)

Walk Down South Street

The Old Fire Engine House is attached to North gable of No 65 South Street; it has now been incorporated into the adjoining cottages, but from outside still appears to be two 4 centre arched doorways with foliated spandrels, the left doorway blocked, and the right with a boarded studded door. It originally housed the fire engine presented to the village in 1733 by Thomas Medlycott. This is now on show in Taunton Museum. The houses opposite have a date of 1821. (Photo 12)

South Street was home to John Dyke's Beer House, hearsay has it that this was one of the houses on right hand side at the bottom of South Street. In 1622, Mary Chalkway named the tanner, John Roe, as the father of her child, claiming she had conceived her child at the drinking house of Robert Raymond. This was obviously an unruly house, since in 1630, two men got drunk there, and stole some chins of bacon. It may have been somewhere here. The house on the left at the very bottom of South Street has been very much changed. It started as a gatehouse into Ven, then it became a private museum run by one of the family. (Photo 13)

Sadly this burned down but was later rebuilt and extended into what is here today. Prior to the industrial revolution weaving was a cottage industry, and was carried out in many homes in Milborne Port. Wool was the commonest fabric, but both flax and hemp were grown locally, flax was used to produce linen, while hemp made a rougher cloth like canvas. Milborne Port specialised in Dowlais, hard wearing, but softer, useful for mattresses. While some linen producers became wealthy, like John Highmore who built Canon Court, employing others to do the weaving, while they traded the cloth, many weavers were poorly paid individuals working from home. As the boom years of providing cloth for military uniforms, with no foreign competition ended in the late 1820s, the weaving industry was failing. Financial incentives had been offered for home produced flax and duties were placed on imports, which helped the cloth makers, once the wars finished and military demand dried up, overproduction in the industry led to hard times. There was no provision for the old, if they had no family to support them, they worked or became paupers, reliant on charity. William Fudge was still working as a glover at the age of 80, and Ann Hiscot, as a linen weaver at the age of 75. Gloving was no better, while the factory owners made profits, pay and conditions for workers were so bad during the 1840s and 1850s, that many glovers emigrated. The parish overseers were told to give £3 to any poor person who would do so. The cottage on the corner is what remains of the Work House. Begun in 1795, it was completed in 1798.

The workhouse was well run, an apothecary and a physician were on call, and at least two paupers were sent to hospital in Bath. The overseers collected the poor rates, out of which they ran the workhouse, & paid cash allowances for lodgings and clothing; they also offered the use of a loom. Workhouse inmates were expected to work, and any profit made was kept by the overseers. There is a wonderful story in Mr McKay's book which tells that in 1813 a woman was accused of stealing some small item. She swore 'may God strike me dumb blind and dead' that she knew nothing about it. Later that day, at supper, she died!

By 1832 it was superseded by the Union Workhouses, and was put to other uses including possibly Silas Dykes Glove factory. It was definitely a laundry and during WW2 it was the shower block for the coloured American troops stationed here. Opposite is C18 Keepers Cottage, once home to the game keeper for Ven.

Turn right into Brook Street

John Parsons kept a Beer House on Brook Street, and the 1841 census shows that George Hatcher was an Inn Keeper on Brook Street, although no name is given for the inn, it may have been the Star, mentioned in 1574. By 1840 Milborne Port had at least five Beer Houses including one called the Three Horseshoes, but the Beer Act removed the necessity to keep records of them so there could have been many more. Beer Houses grew up in reaction to the problem of gin drinking. Gin was cheap, it was easy to make, and no license was required to sell it. It was sold everywhere, and its effects were terrible, as Hogarth's famous depictions showed. Finally, the Gin Act of 1751 was passed and gin drinking began to decline. Beer was considered a more wholesome drink, so attempts were made to encourage people back to it. In 1830, the Beer Act was passed; this meant that, while gin could only be sold in licensed premises, any householder who was paying the poor rate could buy a two guinea excise licence to sell beer, ale, and cider. There was a huge increase in the number of Beer Houses. This area was a bit too close to the stream so it would only have had poorer houses, until the village developed. At the far end of is a cottage dated 1672, but most of the other buildings along Brook St are C18 or 19C.

Turn right into Bathwell Lane

This corner is the position for one of the original Mills. The mill pond can be identified on

old maps, along with the leet, and when the modern house was being built, large flat stones and a wide wall were found in the silt, possibly the remains of the mill race for Bathwell mill.

Turn right along the foot path to Pud Brook

The grassy area on the left is one area where flax was 'retted' before being spun into yarn. Flax production is quite complicated, the stems have to be cut very close to the root, then dried and threshed to remove the seeds. The stems have to be retted by laying them on wet ground so that the pectin binding the fibres together rots away. They are then crushed to separate the fibres & linseed (which provides the oil). The fibres can then be combed and spun into yarn. The manhole to be seen in the middle of the grassed area covers the Bathwell Spring. In 1896 water samples were taken and analysed from all the pumps in the village. The only water fit for human consumption came from this spring which was on Sir Medlycott's land, although he allowed the townspeople to use it. The walk ends here, as it is where I live. The path will take you back to the end of Church Street.

Please feel free to sit and relax for a while and look at the [photos](#) (14, 15 & 16) we have of the area as it used to look.