



Trails

Heritage walks in and around Milton Keynes



Olney

1. Introduction

This walk takes you around the town of Olney, giving you interesting information about the historic market town. Olney has a very rich history dating back to 900AD, with traces of Romans and evacuees from the war. At different times it has had, amongst other things, an electric cinema on the High street and a railway station on Midland Road.

Olney has been called different names such as Ollanege, Olnei and the better known Olney but surprisingly, how you say it has never changed. Also, Olney is in the 1086 Domesday Book, which is a book with all the town names in Britain.

The famous Battle of Olney Bridge, in 1643, is one of the most exciting moments in Olney's history. During the Civil War, Olney was held by the Parliamentarians. Prince Rupert and his army surprised the Olney forces by attacking the bridge. However, they were unable to defeat the Parliamentarians. The Royalists retreated and the historic battle was at an end.

2. The Church of St Peter and St Paul

The church in Olney was built from 1325-1350. It was first restored in 1807 and again in 1885. Our church is also very unusual as it has two fonts (only one of which is used nowadays) and two pulpits one of which is said to have been used by John Newton.

John Newton was the curate at the Parish church from 1764 -1780 and it was here that he and William Cowper wrote the 'Olney Hymns', which were published in 1779. Although not well-known at the time, one of the hymns was 'Amazing Grace' which went on to achieve international acclaim. His grave is in the Churchyard.

During the 19th century Henry J Gauntlett spent some time as the organist of the Parish church. He went on to write lots of music and his tune 'Irby' is usually used to accompany the carol 'Once in Royal David's City'.

In 2009, the church had two new bells added meaning it now has a ring of 10 bells. This was the result of a project to restore the existing bells.

Of course, most churches have a bell tower – our one is 185ft (56.5m) high.

3. The Pancake Race

On the wall outside the churchyard, on Church Street there is a plaque to show the end of the Pancake Race. The Pancake Race has been held in Olney since 1445. The story of the pancake race is that a lady was cooking her pancakes before church, the church bells rang so she ran down the hill still cooking her pancakes.

The rules are that they toss the pancake at the start (outside The Bull Inn) and once at the finish by the church. When the race is just about to start, people flood into the church hall for pancakes. The race starts at 11:55am. Only women who have lived in Olney for at least 6 months are allowed to take part. They wear a traditional apron and cap and race with a frying pan and real pancake. The schools in Olney run mini-races after the main race. The church then holds the great Shrivings service.

4. The Cowper and Newton Museum

In 1768, William Cowper moved into the building in Olney market place which is now the Cowper and Newton Museum. He lived there with his companion Mary Unwin. We do not know whether he was married to her or not. William Cowper lived there until 1786.

William Cowper was a wealthy man in those days and would have been considered amongst the upper class of Olney. The house included many features including: a cellar, an attic and 8 floors (including two half landings).

The roof joined on to next door's roof, so the attic was shared between him and his neighbour. One half of his old house was a servants' house until it was knocked into one large house 3 years ago.

The building retains many of the original features and furniture, including in the grounds the restored flower garden and summer house where Cowper wrote much of his poetry and prose.

Since William moved out in 1786, the building has been a school; a private house; a clothes and hat shop and then finally it was made a museum in 1900. It remains a museum to this day and offers a wonderful opportunity to discover the historical story of Olney.

5. The Market Place

The first ever market was recorded in 1206. There has been a cattle market since the 18th century and it was held every Monday.

In the Market Place there used to be a Shiel Hall. It was used as a school with a blacksmith at the back.

Next to this was the Round House which was an overnight jail where if people were naughty or drunk they would have to stay there overnight. The sphere from the top of the Round House is now in the museum gardens.

The Great Fire of Olney was in 1854. It started in West Side Bakery and spread rapidly across to the East Side, making all thatched houses catch fire. Luckily nobody was killed during the fire.

The Olney Horse Saddlery (Derby House, along from the museum) was once a well-known local store called Sowmans. Sowmans began trading in January 1889. There is still a mosaic in front of the door.

The War Memorial was put up in 1921 after World War I, however it was used for both World War I and World War II. Every year, local groups like the Cubs and Brownies stand around the memorial to remember all the people who died in both wars.

There is still a market held every Thursday and a monthly farmers market.

6. The Lace Industry

The lace industry has played an important part in the history of Olney. The lace factory was built in 1928. It was built by George Knight and it was built for Harry Armstrong.

It was used as a warehouse where the lace was sewn on various articles ready for sale on the approval system. The lace would be sent to women and if they liked it they would send their payment, but if they didn't like it they would send it back.

Lace workers worked from home. The conditions were difficult- there wasn't much light and it was damp and cramped. They used candles for light. Also the workers didn't get paid much.

Children were sent to the lace schools when they were about 5 years of age. They worked from half past eight to half past twelve. They had an hour and a half for lunch and then they worked again. They worked Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings. There was no talking whilst working!

The Lace circle still exists in Olney today, though they now make lace for enjoyment and conditions are hopefully a bit better!

7. The Olney Centre and Schools in Olney

There have been several schools in Olney over the years including the National school from 1847- 1927 (now the church hall) and the Convent school (first half of the 20th century) on West street.

The Olney Centre was a school from 1877 until 1977. Now it is a pre-school, a library and an activity hall for all the community to use. You can still see the school bell on the roof.

Olney Middle School on Yardley Road was originally opened in the 1930s as a senior school with 3 classes. As it served a



rural area, lessons were mainly agricultural including levelling the garden, woodwork, tending the pig sty and gardens and needlework. The school hall was built in 1937 and is still in use today, although the site has seen several changes over the years.

During World War II, the evacuees came to the school with the local children for half a day. When they got home, they had to do jobs for the families they were staying with.

The senior school became Olney Middle School in 1977. Older children went to the Ousedale School in Newport Pagnell until the Ousedale Campus Olney opened in 2005.

8. The Bull Inn

The Bull Inn opened around 1600. Coaches were used and stopped there during long journeys as it took a day to travel from London to Olney. After travelling a long way, horses would need a long rest and would be changed around. You can still see the main entrance where the coaches would enter. Horses could drink and eat at The Bull Inn and people could dine there as well. They would then stay the night and continue on their journey the next day. As well as offering a welcome rest for visitors, The Bull was an important employer of local people, such as chamber maids or cooks. The people that worked there wouldn't get paid much money – especially the stable boys. The Bull Inn stopped being used as much by coaches when the railway came into existence as it was quicker and more comfortable.

The Bull Inn still exists to this day. It is a pub and restaurant. Where the stable yard was is now a beer garden.



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