

Ledbury Town Centre Heritage Walk

Summary

This circular walk around Ledbury uncovers the considerable heritage Ledbury has to offer. The walk will delve into nooks, crannies and alleyways not often observed for which Ledbury has in abundance. Although the distance covered is not great, it will be impossible just to walk this route without recourse to absorbing and reflecting on the architecture and history that is just around each corner. So be prepared to spend two hours and quite possibly up to three hours undertaking this fascinating walk.

The walk can be started at any convenient point. So if arriving by car it is probably best to park in St Katherine's car park which is the main town centre pay and display car park next to St Katherine's Hospital and the Master's House.

Although this area is referred to in historical guides as St Katherine's Hospital, the modern-day focal point is the Masters House. So begin by going into the Master's House which is open from 9.30am to 4.30pm weekdays except Wednesday when it is closed and 9.30am to 12.30pm on Saturday and closed on Sunday. The Master's House was extensively restored between 2011 and 2015 and is now a community hub, a Public Library, a Community Services Centre providing registrar's services and ceremony space which are located in the impressive Great Hall and adjacent rooms. On first entering the Great Hall it is easy to see that it was built to impress.

To better understand the development of The Masters House and St Katherine's Hospital from 1231 to present day, an interesting historical tour is made available through a Tablet with headphones which can be obtained free of charge from the reception counter. One of the Masters of St Katherine's, Edward Cowper has left the most detailed records and accounts between 1584 and 1595. This has allowed modern day archivists to understand the daily undertakings of the Master and his employees. The Tablet tour is based upon a number of the Master's House characters and their roles in providing a service to maintain the daily functions of the brethren.

On leaving the Master's House the large map on the stone plinth provides a reference point to the geography of the area. A layout of the original site has been created on the paving stones in front of the map. A little further on is a set of six sandstone display boards describing the characters that appear on the tablet tour.

Now head towards the High Street and walk past St Katherine's Hall and Chapel which are on the right. On entering the high street the delightful bustle of this ancient market town comes into its own with the iconic Market House opposite and the most spectacular display of black and white timbered buildings which could grace any high street.

Immediately to the left are the almshouses of St. Katherine's Hospital. Keep left towards the bus stop and the stone cattle drinking trough which is planted with flowers to the front of St. Katherine's. A stone plaque by the main gates of St. Katherine's describes how Robert Smirk was the designer when the almshouses were extended during Victorian Times. In 1822 all the original timber framed

almshouses dating back to the 16th century were demolished and stone almshouses were built in their place with an additional row constructed a few years later in 1866. The stone memorial pays tribute to the dead of two world wars and is to the front on the gates.

Looking across the road to the Market House it would not be amiss to wonder as to why the road is quite so wide. Originally in front of the almshouses was another row of buildings called Butchers Row. The history of this development is quite fascinating. Firstly, temporary market stalls were brought here on Market Days. But probably due to the width of the road there was no external pressure to remove the stalls. Over time they became established as permanent buildings. A number of these stalls were butchers premises and as was the custom in those days, animals were slaughtered and sold to feed the town and country folk particularly on market days.

At the far end of the almshouse wall to the left is a plaque bearing the unusual title of the 'Cathol until 1835 site of alley between almshouses and Butchers Row'.

Cross over Bye Street towards the tall tower of the Victorian built Barrett Browning Memorial Institute. This originally contained a reading room, library and meeting rooms. The road from now on is named the Homend. This name was first recorded in 1288 and was derived from the Old English word 'hamm' or 'hom' which probably means 'land hemmed in by water or marsh' or 'river meadow'.

The first and probably the largest of the alleyways to be encountered on this walk is 'Skiff Alley' which is just past the NatWest Bank. Very shortly after is 'Scattergood's yard'. Take a look through the wrought iron gate at this pretty passageway. A little further on 'Ice Bytes' cyber cafe contains what is left of the Tourist Information Centre. A few paces further on is the attractive black and white timbered Olive Tree Italian restaurant.

After window shopping the extensive menu of the Olive Tree, next door is the very popular Homend Bakery Shop. A few doors further on, in the style of many fish and chips shops across the country, is the appropriately named 'The Godfather Part II'.

Continuing with the walk, 'Hodges Yard' at 262 the Homend is a delightful black and white timbered yard to explore. There is also 'The Hodges' monument in the Ledbury Parish churchyard. The narrow 'Fox Lane led to Hills Yard' according to the cast iron plaque and goes left between the buildings and onto more modern developments.

Next is the three storey former Plough Hotel indicated by the wooden gates into Plough Yard.

Next the tiny Homend Walk leads to a couple of retailers and this is followed by the next alleyway 'Thorns Place' which was formerly Madders Yard. The name Madders can just be seen painted on the bricks just beneath the roof line. William Madders and Son were grocers and hardware dealers. A picture from the 'Old Ledbury' website shows that the building was virtually demolished when a lorry crashed into the front of the shop.

Continue away from Ledbury town centre and cross the road named Belle Orchard which leads to modern terrace houses. As the Baptist Church is passed the Esso

Garage comes into view in the distance with on the left the last alleyway on this side of the Homend, the White Horse former Inn and yard.

It is probably best to cross over to the other side of the Homend via the traffic lights at the entrance to the Tesco supermarket.

After crossing over, a little way to the left on a modern brick wall, the tiny oblong sign indicates the former site of the Nags Head. Looking towards the Esso garage but on the opposite side of the road is a large Victorian House obscured by trees. This is where the budding Poet Laureate John Masefield lived. It was named the Knapp and was built by his father Edward Masefield. It is hardly worth visiting the house as it is surrounded by a large wall and hidden from view behind substantial shrubs and trees.

This is where we turn back towards the town. A small brick alleyway is indicated by the Wards Row plaque. A few doors further on above a doorway is the plaque for Dews Yard. Number 153 The Homend looks like it should be a yard as the Methodist Church comes into view. The houses in this section of the Homend are quite substantial, with two fine examples, Homend House and opposite Melrose House.

As the slight corner is turned, the Barrett Browning Memorial Institute comes back into view. Bills Yard is next on the left and then the plaque for the Common Garden alley which is hidden under the awning for Isaacs Linen shop. The alleyway looks well used and heads uphill. Continuing into town, the colourfully attired complete with delivery bicycle stationed above the shop front of DT Waller and Sons is one of Ledbury's premier butchers. Tucked away next door is Smoke Alley which was originally called Smock Alley. The 1851 census indicated that 61 people lived in 13 houses down this alley. The little plaque indicates the original house numbers 43-65 in the alleyway.

Next door is the Horseshoe Inn with a delightful tiny beer garden to the rear. Cross over Bank Crescent to Jenkins the fresh fruit and vegetable shop. A little further on is Ledbury's next amazing butcher, the Llandinabo farm shop. Since 2005 it has been run as the flagship store of the Traditional Breeds Meat Marketing Company. The butcher only sells meat from pedigree, rare and traditional breeds. A little further on the Velvet Bean chocolate shop is a chocoholics delight as the most wonderful aroma of warm chocolate invites you to enter this tiny emporium.

A little further on there is an unmarked pretty black and white timbered alley just before the Seven Stars pub. The Homend Mews has two picturesque entrances and is located behind the sweatshop. The Muse cafe provides a pleasant courtyard dining experience. Note the mouse hole by the step. On exiting continue past or indeed go into the Three Counties Cider Shop. The range of ciders produced in Herefordshire is quite considerable.

The next alley I have named fish and chip alley as there is no plaque but an inviting sign to enjoy take-away fish and chips. On reaching the corner next to the impressive market house, turn left past the Market House Cafe and Delicatessen into the attractively cobbled Church Walk. At the entrance there is normally an array of hoardings advertising the eateries to be found close by.

Looking up the left-hand side of the lane the first attractive black and white timbered building dates back to early Tudor times and houses the Town Council Offices. Purely by chance during internal renovation a wonderful array of 16th century wall paintings were discovered. The paintings are based on designs and inscriptions, imitating expensive tapestries and wall hangings found in higher status Elizabethan homes. The 16th century Painted Room is open to the public and guides provide a short talk. Due to the frailty of the wall paintings the moisture content of the air is monitored by limiting the group size. Admission is free

A little further on, the public toilets have been cleverly blended into the architecture of the lane. Then follows the exceptional Prince of Wales public house which dates from the 15th or 16th century. It serves up a range of excellent real ales, cider and tasty food, particularly the faggots which are so popular in Ledbury.

Further on is the Museum and Heritage Centre which is believed to have been built circa 1500 for an East Anglian wool merchant. An interesting feature is that a stream ran under the building and was probably used for washing the wool fleeces. The stream bed can be seen through a glass panel constructed into the floor. Later in the 16th century, the building was converted to a grammar school. In 1799, the last master of the school, Mr William Humphreys was appointed by the Bishop of Hereford. He maintained the school into his old age but with dwindling pupil numbers the school closed around 1830. It then was divided up into five tenements until 1969. Following years of neglect it has been restored to its present day splendour.

Looking up the right hand side of the lane there is the 'Raft' clothes shop then Mrs Muffins Teashop, then follows Chez Pascal, a family run French Brasserie. Further on the Butchers Row House Museum is set back a little from the lane, behind a pretty courtyard. The present day museum was originally one of the Butchers Row buildings mentioned previously. Behind the museum is the Burgage Hall which was built in 1852. It was originally built as a meeting house for the Congregational Chapel.

Spend some time taking in all that this wonderful lane has to offer. On approaching the end of the lane on the right there is a black and white timbered building named the Tannery. Next is a courtyard entrance and then the 16th century Church House where posters indicate that the John Masefield Poetry Society is located here. At the top of the lane, set back from the lane is the earlier 15th century Abbot's Lodge which was once the vicarage.

On the left the impressive Georgian styled Old Magistrates House stands proud. It was a police station with the Magistrates' Court and cells behind. Look opposite towards the delightful Walled Garden and the entrance to the churchyard at grid reference SO 71263 37687.

Ledbury Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels was described by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'the premier parish church of Herefordshire'. In 1086 The Domesday Book identifies a Minster Church.

The church has unusually a separate bell tower containing eight bells with the oldest dating from 1690. The tower was constructed in four stages, the three lower ones date from about 1230 and the fourth taking the height to 202ft is the spire which was

built in 1733. Although detached belfries are uncommon in the UK there are a further six in Herefordshire.

The church clock activates a carillon which plays a repertoire of seven hymn tunes at three-hourly intervals during the day from 9am, 12 noon, 3pm and 6pm.

The main entrance is on the north side of the church, through the double doors. The second set of doors looks quite rough and marked. This is the damage caused by musket fire during the English Civil War. Take a few moments to look for a number of musket balls still embedded in the wood. The first impression on entering the church is its sheer size.

To begin a brief tour of the church, keep to the right along the west wall. The impressive centre aisle leads the eye to the painting of the 'Last Supper'. This is a copy of Leonardo de Vinci's work which was painted by local artist, Thomas Ballard in 1824.

In the far south west corner is the imposing Biddulph family vault. Continuing along the south wall there is a memorial to Captain Skinner. Further along there are an interesting collection of bibles going back to 1610 and prayer books from 1659. The St Anne's Chapel is located in the southern corner. On the east wall look for the memorial to the Moulton Barrett's, parents of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Walking towards the Chancel provides a superb view of the famous Last Supper oil painting. On the right the intricately carved Skynner family tomb is resplendent. Many of the guide books and websites refer to Elizabeth Skynner's Jacobean-style hat and her Elizabethan-style dress and ruff. Notice the child reclining at the back and the first of the kneeling daughters both clasping a skull (Do note that the skull held by the kneeling daughter is now missing) this is an indication that they predeceased their parents. Above the tomb on the south wall there is an uncommon facet in the design of the modern stained glass church window where snow is depicted in the scenery of St Martin of Tours cutting his cloak in half to give to a beggar.

Over to the north side of the church on the stone floor are some interesting tomb stones including the Skynners. The small metal plaque on the wall describes:

'Here lyeth the body of Theo Cupper of Climpton Oxfordshire esquire who being of age 70 years was made immortal 27th of June 1621. Dead yes and wormed admit he be what then he lives inclosed in the hearts of men'.

The hole in the wall or squint into the North Chapel allowed those parishioners who were suffering from skin disease (this was generally called Leprosy but was a catchall for all skin ailments) to see the vicar leading the service without themselves being seen by the congregation in days gone by.

Continuing past the North Chapel is the Chapter House which was built in 1330. This was an extension to the church and is now used for parish meetings. The North aisle returns to the North Door via a copy of Botticelli's Madonna and Child and another lesser valued painting of the Last Supper.

On exiting the church opposite the north door look for the rare style of triangular box tomb. The cemetery is a little unusual in that it is mainly situated on the north side of the church. The most likely reason for this is that the stream which you can see

redirected at the far end of the churchyard, enclosed by metal railings used to flow down the south side of the churchyard and along Church Lane.

Walk around the church to the left. Along the south wall of the church are a number of wooden benches. The first has a small square QR code attached and if scanned by a mobile phone a poem can be heard from the 'Bench Poems Project' undertaken by Ledbury Primary School during the Ledbury Poetry Festival. Opposite the bench in the churchyard, a signpost indicates the Garden of Remembrance. The Blacksmith's Tomb is quite well known. It is the tomb of Thomas Russell which is said to have inspired John Masefield's poem Blacksmith's Epitaph. The witty epitaph reads:

'My sledge and hammer lie reclined, My bellows too have lost their wind. My fire's extinct, my forge decayed, and in the dust my vice is laid. My coal is spent, my iron gone. My firedried corpse now lies at rest. My soul smoke-like is soaring to be blest'

The final two lines are missing due to weather damage to the gravestone. Further research has indicated that the same inscription can be found on the gravestone for George Jones, village blacksmith', in Old Cleeve Churchyard, Somerset.

After enjoying the inscription follow the path round to the right, heading away from the entrance to the churchyard and in front is Cabbage Lane with stone walls on both sides. The Police Station is to the left and the little metal sign for Cabbage Lane is almost hidden behind the ivy on a newish stone pillar as the lane exits onto the Worcester road. On the opposite wall there is a stone inscription by Thomas Badsey who in 1901 restored the wall.

Walk past Masefield Solicitors, the same family as the poet Laureate John Masefield. Opposite are the new buildings and gates into Ledbury Park. On the right hand side set back from the road is the impressive looking Priory Lodge and Priory Gatehouse. The Ledbury Guide of 1824 describes this as 'Mr Dunn's Academy'. Hidden away behind the first house on the Worcester Road and the gravel driveway to Priory Lodge is the secluded Public Footpath into Tilley's Alley. This is a delightful courtyard and was in 1530 the site of the King's Arms Inn which had its frontage on the High Street. It closed in 1778. The yard is named after the successful business orientated Tilley family who owned motor accessory, car and cycle hire, bookshop, stationers and to this day 'Tilley Printing' which was established as a letterpress in 1875. There is a colourful display of their printed posters on the wall of the press. The narrow alleyway leads out into the busy High Street.

Turn right and a few paces further on turn right again into the Design Quarter alleyway next door to the excellent Gurneys the butchers at number 12 The High Street. This has been a butcher's shop since 1871. This alley is a gem of old and contemporary design. The Hus Hem Scandinavian design shop, Shanti-Shanti handicrafts and Serenity hairdressers provide a stunning reflection of sensitive design in a historical setting.

Turning right on exiting the alley is Ledbury's premier wine emporium, Hay Wines. Continue past a few stores and into Tinsmith Alley this is alongside the most centrally located hostelry in Ledbury the Retreat Pub. The alley is colourfully decorated and the Tinsmith linens, fabrics and homeware shop is located in an

extraordinary designed building. Both the Design Quarter and Tinsmiths Alley are worth visiting just from a design and architectural viewpoint.

Continuing towards the Market House the last alley on this walk is Chapel alley, which as its name indicates leads to a Congregational Chapel which was founded in 1607 but closed in 1970.

On returning to the high street spend some time looking at the iconic Market House. It was constructed in 1617 and altered after the English Civil War. The upper floor was originally used as a storeroom for grain, wool and hops when they were brought to market. It stands on sixteen oak pillars cut from the Malvern Forest. The open ground floor is used to this day as a market and information place. In the recent past the first floor was the Town Hall then it became a small theatre and was used for public meetings.

Turn back towards the pedestrian crossing and the St. Katherine's almshouses. Once over the road there is an opportunity for a further short excursion to complete the town centre heritage walk.

If time is available head up the High Street towards the Feathers Hotel. The Feathers Inn dates from 1560, and was originally two houses. During the plague years the burgage plots were amalgamated to form the current imposing site. It was an important coaching inn providing overnight accommodation for the Cheltenham to Aberystwyth stagecoach.

On approaching the cross-roads three sides of the junction are adorned with the most splendid black and white timbered buildings, the just mentioned Feathers Hotel, opposite the House on stilts and across the road is the impressive black and white Ledbury Park House built by Edward Skinner, circa 1595. Originally it was named New House. Pevsner in 1963 described it as 'the grandest black and white house in the county'. The archives tell us that it was Prince Rupert's headquarters during the battle of Ledbury in 1645.

New Street was named a long time ago in 1232, surely by now it should be called 'Old street'. Turn right into New Street and further down on the left is the fine 16th century former coaching inn, the Talbot. Once inside the oak panelled dining room is impressive and the real ale very welcome after a walk. After enjoying the pleasant atmosphere of this hostelry cross over the road and back towards the cross-roads. On the left is the rear entrance to the Feathers Hotel. The last time I walked through this entrance and car park an ancient Bugatti was being tended to by the AA man. The bar of the Feathers is very welcoming, modern and stylish and unsurprisingly serves great real ales and ciders.