

Standon Nr. Ware Walk 12:

An Historical Amble down Standon High Street

This walk is based on an account by the late Edna Holden, an acknowledged mine of Standon local history information, and gives some insight into the history of the buildings in Standon Village High Street. It has been somewhat abbreviated, and some new information which has come to light has been added where appropriate. It is a brief survey of what can be seen today.

Distance and time taken: Just about a mile, and as long as you like!

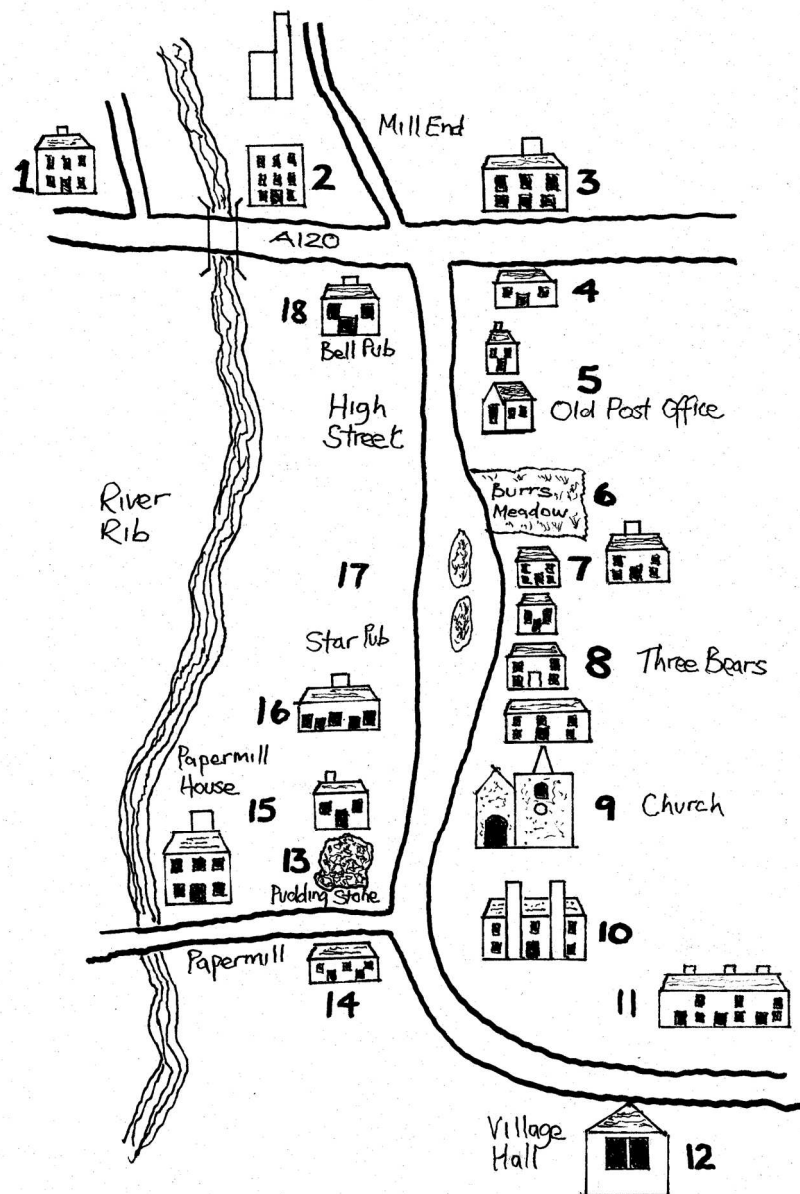
General:

Standon's wide High Street is indicative of a medieval market town. In the early 13th century Gilbert de Clare, who was Lord of the Manor of Standon, decided to start a market in the village to increase his revenues. He obtained a monopoly from the King, and all other markets in the area were suppressed, so Standon became a very important place. Plots around the market area were let out, and eventually the stallholders formed themselves into a Borough and by the mid 14th century Standon was the eleventh biggest town in Hertfordshire. But in later times, the position of the village away from the two main roads led to its decline as a market centre as new trading centres were formed beside the new roads

This walk covers the village centre streets only, i.e. High Street, Hadham Road and Paper Mill Lane.

1 A suitable starting point is the south side of the bridge carrying the A120 over the river Rib facing the Old Flour Mill. From the western end and a little further on it is possible to see the China Garden Chinese restaurant. This originally opened as the Railway Tavern built in about 1870 for the convenience of travellers when the railway ran through Standon from Buntingford to Stansted Abbots. The railway station stood partly where the footpath swings widely on the corner of Station Road, and partly where the new estate of houses has been built. It fell victim to the Beeching cuts in the early 1960s.

There have been several different bridges here, and in 1782 a bridge wide enough to take carriages and carts was built. Before this what is now the A 120 was little more than a track. The middle pier of the bridge (only visible from the southerly bank of the river at the water's edge) has a plaque fixed to it:



This fascinating amble by Pat Bird gives real insight into the history of the buildings of Standon village – from the 13th century chancel of the church to the 20th century river bridge.

1858
Standon Bridge
Thos. Smith
County Surveyor
1858 - 1965

Surely the oldest Surveyor ever employed by the county?

2 Whilst looking at the China Garden, opposite you on the other side of the road, is the building which was a Flour Mill built in 1901 and now converted into flats. The original Mill was on the other (east) side of the river, and can be located by a tall chimney which you can see after walking in an easterly direction towards the cross roads, and glancing down Mill End, which is the northerly arm. This mill was a water mill and probably dated back to the Domesday Book. Very little of the original mill remains. It was probably the Manorial Mill to which the inhabitants of the parish brought their corn for the miller to mill. It was said to stand "without the gate to the north of the village", so probably the High Street extended all the way down towards it in medieval times.

3 At the junction of Mill End and the A120, on the opposite corner from where you are now standing is Town Farm House. This interesting building is a good example of the fashion in the 18th century to encase or front timber framed buildings with a veneer of brick, when timber framed buildings began to be considered a bit rustic and old fashioned. It is believed that this was originally two separate buildings, later joined with a middle section, and the whole roofed over. Many original timbers remain inside.

4 On the opposite corner, on the south side of the A120, is Falcon House, again a timber framed house which was the Falcon pub until at least the mid 1920s. Many of the houses you will see as you walk down the High Street have the remains of timber framed buildings inside them, dating back to the time when Standon was an important Market Village, but now with frontages of brick, or plastered over.

5 Turning into the High Street and looking across the road, immediately visible is a domestic garage. Behind this is a building, now two houses, the right hand one being known as "Pepper Cottage" after a former resident of the house. Earlier it was a public house known as the Red Lion, and even earlier a stables, a slaughter house, and going back to the 17th century a forge stood on this site, but the house has now been almost completely rebuilt.

Next to Pepper cottage is the Old Post Office. The Post Office was located here from about 1940 until the mid 1990s. This building is probably the oldest intact inhabited house in the High Street, and although the exterior walls have been plastered over and pargetted (the patterning you can see on the front and side walls) many original timbers remain visible inside. The house has been reliably dated back to before 1380, in particular the left hand jettied "cross wing". It is possible that an even earlier Hall House stood where the right hand portion is today, rebuilt around 1500 perhaps, using some of the original sooted timbers in the roof, which define a house with a central hearth and the smoke going out through a hole in the roof. It is thought that this may have been the Court House for the Borough of Standon in the 14th/15th century, when the market was at its height, and beautiful Crown Posts in the roof area of the cross wing were clearly meant as a show of wealth and power. A "lean to" was added on the left hand side, probably about 1600, maybe when the chimneys were introduced. The occupants over the centuries have included a blacksmith, a butcher (at the time of the slaughter house next door) and the curate of St Mary's. It was kept in the ownership of the Lordship of Standon until the estate was sold in 1843. Note the gothic style windows upstairs, of which more anon, and the little window on the south side which allowed anyone in the Court Room upstairs to keep an eye on what was going on in the High Street and the market area!

6 After passing the late 19th century houses 15/17/19 (where a forge used to be located from about 1735 to 1860) we find a field called "Burr's Meadow", originally the Vicarage Orchard. This was once the site of the Vicarage - "a fair house with a garden and orchard" - conveyed by Walter Lord Aston to the use of the Vicars of Standon in perpetuity in 1674, in return for a rent of two pairs of leather gloves each year. The last Vicar to live in this Vicarage was Richard Jeffereys who resigned the living in 1811. The house was then falling into decay and has now disappeared completely. The next Vicar, the Rev Henry Law, moved to a house in Kents Lane, roughly where the modern vicarage is today.

7 Continuing along the High Street the next group of buildings comprises several with frontages of Victorian brick and one large cream one. All these buildings are timber framed, and the various roof levels are thought to have been produced by raising them at dates unknown. Numbers 49 and 51 probably contain the remaining parts of an early 14th century aisled hall house. Several surviving features point to this, including a fine crown post with moulded capital in the roof. It is possible that this was the even earlier original Vicarage, granted to the village of Standon by the Prior of St John of Jerusalem, Joseph de Chauncey in 1280. To quote the late Adrian Gibson: "The house is a remarkable survival. Enough remains of the right features to be sure of the original layout of the building."

The last house in the terrace is The Old Windmill. This is also 16th century timber framed and was once pargetted. It was formerly a public house called The Windmill until the late 1960s. The name was obviously taken from the existence of a windmill which once stood on the higher ground at the back, but no trace of it remains today.

8 The next three houses are known locally as the Three Bears, for reasons which we hope are obvious. Only Little Bear - and recently Middle Bear - are called by those names. Number 55 (Little Bear) has a little Bear on the front door to help you identify it! This has an 18th/19th century- frontage built on to a 16th century timber framed building with a range of outhouses stretching back, which were originally occupied by a wheelwright. More recently, Canon Perowne, the well-known Vicar of Standon and Chaplain to the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, lived here in retirement. Number 57 (Middle Bear) also has a frontage added on to a timber framed house, and has an extensive cellar which may relate to the fact that a wine merchant once lived there. In the case of Big Bear, now known as Standon House, a whole Queen Anne style extra house has been built on to the front of a much earlier timber framed building. Standon House was originally known as Anchor Hall in the early 18th century, which makes one wonder if the rear part may have been a pub before it was "gentrified" by the addition of the imposing front. Note the wine or beer bottles encased above the Dormers which may give a clue. Anchor House in Puckeridge High Street was once a pub, so this may well be the same case with Standon House.

9 The next building on this side of the High Street is the parish Church of St Mary, thought to be built on the site of an early cell or chapel dating back to the ninth century. The present church has a chancel circa 1230, built onto the nave of an earlier church that was rebuilt c. 1345. The west porch and tower date from the 15th century. The tower was originally separate from the church connected only by two walls with an open grassed area between. In the mid 19th century this area was enclosed to provide an organ chamber.

Inside the church the height of the altar above the nave is a very striking feature. There is an upward slope of the nave to the eight steps to the chancel which give a rise of 4ft. The chancel also has a pronounced upward incline and there are a further five steps from the chancel to the sanctuary with an added rise of 2ft 3ins. This gives a dramatic view of the altar as you enter the church (by the west door, which is unusual). It is known as a processional church, and was built by the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, taking advantage of the lie of the land to produce this effect.

Much restoration work was carried out in 1864, during which Saxon foundations were found. Usually there is a leaflet inside the church which gives more information, which it is not necessary to reproduce here. But do take a moment to see the impressive monument to Sir Ralph Sadleir on the south side of the chancel, by the altar. Sir Ralph is Standon's most famous son, and was at one time the wealthiest commoner in England, and secretary to Henry VIII after the execution of Thomas Cromwell. He profited enormously at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. He appears frequently in the books by Hilary Mantel "Wolf Hall" and "Bring up the Bodies".

10 Next to the church is the building now known as Knights Court, although still referred to locally on occasions as the Old School. It is thought that the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, who had a Preceptory (religious house) in the area of the present Standon Friars farm in medieval times, built a hospice on this site and that later it was rebuilt as a Guild Hall, with its jetty towards the church, as was often the custom, in the late 16th century when Standon was much larger and more important than now. By the early 1800s it was mainly in use as a school, and the far end was the parish workhouse. The boys and girls had separate entrances and were strictly segregated. Standon schools are now in modern premises in Station Road, and Knights Court is in residential use. At some time in the early 19th century the usual lath and plaster infill between the beams was replaced by bricks, possibly to create the popular idea of a Tudor building. The workhouse was abolished and that part of the building was added to the school when it needed expansion.

The children of the village were beneficiaries of a legacy in 1612 to help with the maintenance of the school. Schoolmasters can be traced back to Henry Gale in 1723.

11 The last building on this side of the road to be considered is the one comprising the village almshouses. This building is possibly 18th century, and was used originally as work sheds attached to the Workhouse (see paragraph 10.) It is thought that reeds which came from the River Rib were dried here for basket weaving. It is now converted into five self-contained units

12 The Village Hall stands on the opposite side of the road. This was originally opened as the Workmen's Institute in 1886. Inside the hall there is a large photograph of Lieutenant Charles Ralph Le Blanc Smith bearing his life history and recording his death at Ypres in November 1915. The photograph was placed in the hall when his parents, then owners of Standon Lordship, presented the present hall to the village in memory of their son. There is also a plaque on the outside of the building. Good use of the hall is made by village organisations. There was a Windmill situated in the field to the rear of the hall until at least the 1920s when it was demolished.

13 Retracing our steps a little, we come to a small white railed green area at the junction of the High Street and Paper Mill Lane. Here we find a piece of "Pudding Stone" mounted on a flint plinth. A plaque in front of it will tell you what this is, but this sort of deposit is not unique to Hertfordshire. It is technically called silicrete and was formed millions of years ago from a marine deposit of pebbles, silica etc., on a bed of chalk, which dissolved at some time and then glued themselves together like concrete. It is possible that this pudding stone was originally unearthed on the site where the church now stands where it had been set up as the "great stone" around which the primitive Britons of the locality gathered to decide weighty matters. Later it possibly formed part of the churchyard wall before being moved to its present position.

14 Continuing down Paper Mill Lane, on the left are two cottages worthy of notice. These are called Church End Cottages and it is not difficult to see that they were at one time a single house. They are mainly 19th century but contain the remains of late 16th century construction. The windows are reputed to have come from the Lordship (see paragraphs 5 and 16). Legend has it that Daniel Clark the Sexton of the church lived here, and he would dig up bones in the churchyard to make room for the newly dead. He kept a large basket in his cottage containing old bones, and claimed to know whose remains they were, and delighted to tell their histories.

15 Further down Paper Mill Lane you will cross what used to be the railway line which ran through Standon. Here there used to be a level crossing, but the railway company originally did not want the expense of a manned crossing, and so built a substantial bridge (which can just be seen in the undergrowth on the left) to take a new road. But the local inhabitants refused to use it and still drove their livestock etc., over the railway line so the railway company had to give in, and the bridge stands to this day as a memorial to local intransigence. More of it can be seen if you go into the meadows on the left by the ford.

We then come to the River Rib, which can be crossed by the ford, but only in the driest of weather and the sturdiest of vehicles. Here on the right is Paper Mill House. The Mill was one of five recorded in the Domesday Book in the parish (see paragraph 2 for another). All these Mills were water mills, taking their power from the River Rib, which must have been a much stronger flowing river in those days. The house is timber framed possibly 16th century but parts may be older. The original mill belonged to the Knights Hospitaller "without the gate to the south of the village of Standon" so we now have a good idea of the size of medieval Standon. In 1846 it was said to be making very thin paper for bibles, but later it was making brown paper bags for grocers. Later still it became a sawmill. Floods were a problem in this area, but alleviation works were carried out in 1984 which virtually eliminated the risk, but severe rainfall has still caused the river to overflow its banks on occasions. An elderly former resident of the village told the story of how as a boy he and his friends would dive off a wall near the waterwheel and swim in the river. They also use to catch and eat crayfish, which can still be found in parts of the river.

Continuing back along Paper Mill Lane the way you came, the houses behind the Pudding Stone green were at one time shops, and were probably originally three houses - note there is no number 72; the houses are numbered 70 and 74. Note the drop kerbs which facilitated use of barrows etc., for unloading goods.

16 The Star was built around 1550 and has some later 17th century work, and has been a pub for many years. It was an open Hall with a central crown post.

17 The open area to which we now come was the area of the original market, and nowadays the May Fair is held here on the first Monday in May, and visitors come from miles around to see the Maypole dancing, Morris Men and many more modern attractions.

Many of the houses you now pass on this side of the road are timber framed or have remnants of timber frames left inside after modernisation, which took place particularly in the Victorian era.

The Red House (number 46) is probably older than at first appears to be the case as the rear contains some timber framed remains, but the front is probably somewhat later. The portrait figurehead wearing a red cap is thought to be a builder's mark.

Number 42 has a varied history, dating probably from the 16th century and later, and as was often the case with large, centrally positioned houses, it was later converted into four cottages, and only within living memory converted back into one house. Note the windows here which are identical to those of the Old Post Office (see para 5) and very similar to those in the cottages in Paper Mill Lane. All are said to have come from the Lordship when it fell into decay.

Number 30 was where the Post Office was first situated when it started in Standon in the 1860s, before it moved to number 13 in the 1940s and then back to 28b in the late 1990s.

The group of houses now known as Standon Court have been built in a former builder's yard, and the barn converted into two homes.

Standon still has five shops (long may they continue!) but early last century there were a dozen or more. At the time of writing, here you pass the Butcher, Baker, Post Office and even the Hairdresser.

18 The modern buildings which you will now come to further along on the left are called Sargents, having been built on the site of a shop of that name.

Finally we come to The Bell. This is probably 16th or 17th century, and originally timber framed but much altered. It appears to have been a pub since at least 1727, and probably before. There was also a carpenters shop here in the 19th century. Before the official Post Office was opened in Standon, letters could be taken to The Bell for posting, at least as early as the 1830s.

And so we come to the end of our amble down Standon High Street, the centre of a village full of history, and in its day a very prosperous place. But there is still time to pop into our very convenient Convenience Store (Westwoods) which stocks most things that might take your fancy.

Paths in Standon Parish are clearly waymarked. If you come across any problem with missing waymarks, please contact the Parish Paths Partnership: john@walkinginengland.co.uk.

This leaflet has been produced by Standon Parish Council working as part of the Parish Paths Partnership, a programme funded by Hertfordshire County Council's Countryside Management Service (CMS). CMS helps communities across Hertfordshire to care for and enjoy the environment. www.hertslink.org/cms

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